Who Speaks When Form Persists?

Authorship, Authority and Authenticity in Artistic Practice

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Figure 1. © Olga Cuxart Oriol, *All Living Beings III*, Dunhuang series, 2024. Porcelain with painted glaze. Detail.

Abstract

Certain forms remain recognisable despite changes in material, technique, and cultural meaning. This paper examines how such continuity is sustained in artistic practice, extending the question posed at the ADPRex × APARN symposium in Singapore: who speaks when form persists? Drawing on my work in Jingdezhen, it considers how material behaviour, specialised knowledge, and accumulated experience influence artistic decisions. Building on earlier research into *Operational Memory of Form*, the discussion examines three examples: the transformation of painted glazes during high-temperature firing, subsequent pictorial interventions on porcelain inspired by Dunhuang, and the translation of a sculptural study into a monumental work. These cases reveal different relationships between what the artist anticipates, what materials make possible, and what is retained or reconsidered as the work develops. Posthumanist approaches to material agency inform a distinction between contributions to artistic production and the attribution of authorship, while Buddhist non-attachment and Daoist accounts of skilled action offer perspectives on expectation, judgement, and responsiveness. I argue that formal persistence depends neither on reproducing an initial design nor on relinquishing artistic intention, but on the capacity to develop continuity through transformation.

Keywords: persistence of form; material agency; artistic authorship; porcelain painting; Buddhist non-attachment; Jingdezhen

Introduction

Across painting, ceramics, and sculpture, my work raises a recurring question: what remains recognisable as an artwork changes during its making? A painted composition may survive substantial changes in colour and contour during firing, while a sculptural form may require considerable adjustment when translated into another material and scale. In both cases, continuity involves more than preserving an initial design.

In earlier research, I examined material practice as a source of situated knowledge and developed the concept of *Operational Memory of Form* to describe how formal relationships are retained and reworked through embodied practice and material engagement (Cuxart Oriol 2026a; 2026b). The present article extends that inquiry to the decisions artists make in response to material transformation, drawing on examples from my ceramic and sculptural work at successive stages of their development.

Form refers here to an object's shape, proportions, and the arrangement of painted elements on its surface. Persistence concerns which features of a work endure despite transformation. The Diamond Sutra's phrase "without dwelling in forms" offers a perspective from which to reconsider fixed expectations and explore the possibilities that emerge between intention and change (Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra, section 10).

Material agency and knowledge in Jingdezhen

Ingold challenges the separation of a complete design from the material that receives it — form develops as practitioners intervene within material flows and forces (Ingold 2010). High-temperature glaze painting on porcelain makes this especially visible: application and firing conditions alter colour, boundaries, and texture**,** reshaping the painted composition. Preparation draws on repeated tests, assessment of previous results, and accumulated knowledge of materials and kiln behaviour. Experience helps me distinguish what I can adjust before firing from what must be assessed afterwards. Barad questions whether agency belongs exclusively to an autonomous human subject (Barad 2003), directing attention to the material and relational conditions that shape artistic outcomes. Yet recognising distributed agency does not necessarily imply shared artistic authorship. Material behaviour, technical expertise, and artistic decisions contribute in different ways to the work, and their respective roles deserve attention, particularly in collaborative settings. Jingdezhen provides a distinctive context for my ceramic work, with its network of workshops, access to materials, and specialised knowledge passed between generations of makers.

The inscription of the Jingdezhen Handicraft Porcelain Industry Sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List on 25 July 2026, just three days before this research was presented at the ADPRex × APARN symposium in Singapore, offered a timely historical context for the discussion. The UNESCO decision identifies a production system characterised by innovation, fine divisions of labour, specialisation, and interconnected stages of manufacture (UNESCO World Heritage Committee 2026). My account, however, concerns contemporary artistic practice within this longstanding ceramic environment, where detailed expertise remains available through everyday exchanges. My connection with Jingdezhen began during my studies, completed in 2014, at what is now Jingdezhen Ceramic University, and has continued since through work in studios and shared spaces. Over the years, I have developed relationships with experienced makers, compared material outcomes, and adapted established techniques to my artistic aims. Such exchanges support experimentation, but they also depend on knowing which questions to ask, whose expertise to seek, and how to interpret the answers in relation to a particular work. Figure 2 documents selected settings and aspects of this working environment.



Figure 2. Selected settings in Jingdezhen. Top: workshop space and prepared glaze materials. Bottom: painting a plaque and kiln equipment. Photographs © Olga Cuxart Oriol. Artist's archive.

Non-attachment and skilled response

The *Diamond Sutra* situates non-attachment within a Buddhist teaching on wisdom and conduct, including the possibility of action undertaken without dwelling in forms or outcomes (Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra, sections 4 and 10). Applied here as a philosophical perspective, this suggests a way of working in which experience guides decisions without requiring the result to conform entirely to an initial expectation, while familiarity and attentiveness work together even when the precise result remains uncertain.

In ceramic practice, many steps cannot be undone. An unexpected result may open a convincing new direction or weaken the intended composition. The difficulty lies in distinguishing attachment to an anticipated image from a judgement that the fired composition has lost its coherence. Given this irreversibility, the question is not simply whether to accept an unexpected result, but whether it offers possibilities worth pursuing. A fired surface may invite further painting, and an unforeseen image may be pursued in another work. In this reading, non-attachment does not mean abandoning artistic intention; letting go of a fixed result allows artistic intention to evolve through material transformation.

The story of Cook Ding in chapter 3 of the *Zhuangzi* offers a complementary perspective on cultivated expertise. Through long experience, the cook learns to follow the structure of what he encounters rather than impose the same movement in every situation. His skill lies not only in knowing how to act, but also in recognising when familiar methods require caution or adjustment (Zhuangzi, chapter 3).

These perspectives are not interchangeable. Buddhist non-attachment addresses our relationship to expectations; Cook Ding illustrates the judgement acquired through experience; and posthumanist thought draws attention to the conditions of making that lie beyond individual intention. Together, they help frame a practical question: how does an artist maintain a sense of direction while responding to changes that cannot be fully anticipated?

The photographic examples below examine these questions in the selected works.

Decisions during making

1 Glaze painting before and after firing

The photographs in Figure 3 compare a painted porcelain plaque before and after firing. Pale and grey applications become a finished surface displaying pronounced irregular blue edges, variations in colour density, and multiple textures. The broad floral arrangement remains recognisable, but the balance of visual emphasis changes. Darker areas acquire greater visual weight than in the unfired photograph, producing effects almost impossible to reproduce precisely.

Artistic decisions extend across stages: anticipating possible effects while painting, examining the results after firing, and identifying what to adjust in subsequent work. During the firing and cooling cycle, the glaze undergoes further transformation inside the kiln beyond my direct intervention — a process that can take from a couple of days up to a week. These transformations raise the possibility of material co-authorship: temperature changes and firing conditions help shape the final image. Accumulated experience allows material responses to be identified and explored. Careful documentation of tests and firing conditions becomes essential for understanding variations and informing further work.



Figure 3. © Olga Cuxart Oriol. High-temperature glaze painting on porcelain, before firing (left) and after firing (detail, right). Images from the artist’s working archive. 2026.

2 Painting the Dunhuang series

All Living Beings I (Figure 4) and *All Living Beings III* (Figure 1) introduce a further stage of intervention, applying abstracted Buddhist-inspired imagery to the surface of porcelain vessels. Their motifs draw on the murals of Dunhuang, including the Mogao Caves in Gansu, a site that preserves Buddhist art dating from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries (UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.).

The glazed surface establishes a distinctive ground of colour and texture before further pictorial intervention. In the photographed work, the abstract outlines remain legible while partly merging into the textured ceramic ground. The spaces between the figures leave areas of the ceramic surface exposed, allowing the material irregularities to participate in the composition. The work carries forward an earlier transformation through high-temperature firing, followed by a renewed pictorial intervention; successive firings and layers of painting continue to soften the image and darken the tones, echoing the kiln's own agency in the process described above.

The relationship between imagery and surface thus extends beyond transferring an inherited motif onto a new support. Identifiable halos maintain a connection with the source of inspiration, while their placement and degree of definition vary from one work to another — persistence here is a contour reworked within a new composition, not a motif repeated unchanged. I decide which elements and boundaries should remain visible in each piece, so the imagery drawn from Dunhuang reactivates an inherited historical reference while being reinterpreted through the material character of each work.



Figure 4. © Olga Cuxart Oriol, *All Living Beings I,* Dunhuang series, 2023. Porcelain with painted glaze. Overall view and detail. Exhibited in Paris, Berlin, Brussels and Shanghai.

3 A comparison across materials and scale

Dancing Leaves of Life (Harbin, 2023; Figure 5) extends the discussion of formal persistence through a change of medium and scale. The initial clay study and the completed six-metre steel sculpture retain an identifiable arrangement of upward-reaching elements and open intervals. When the clay study was enlarged, the weight of its upper section caused it to crack during drying, so it never reached the firing stage; the change of material addressed this limitation. Digital development and fabrication adjusted the design to meet the structural demands of this scale. Here, continuity depends on decisions about proportion and balance.



Figure 5. © Olga Cuxart Oriol, *Dancing Leaves of Life*, Harbin, China, 2023. Clay study and installed stainless-steel sculpture, 600 × 570 × 264 cm. Public sculpture collection.

Conclusion

Across the three cases, continuity does not lie in repeating an initial design. In the plaque, firing rearranges the painted composition; in the Dunhuang vessels, the fired surface becomes the ground for a new intervention; in the sculpture, the cracking of an enlarged clay study reveals a material limitation that leads to a change of medium. Each time, the work continues because something is recognised as essential and something else is let go.

Material behaviour and specialised knowledge contribute to what is possible; the artist remains responsible for what the work becomes. Authorship lies not in controlling every transformation, but in judging which possibilities to pursue, when to intervene and when the work has reached its resolution. The question “who speaks?” therefore concerns both the conditions that shape a work and the authority to determine its final expression. In this account, authenticity rests on the specificity and integrity of the artist’s engagement with acquired knowledge, inherited imagery, and material possibilities.

Non-attachment, understood in this context, is not indifference to the outcome, but the freedom to reconsider what was initially imagined. Because many steps in ceramics cannot be undone, each decision must take account of what has already happened. This is also a condition of human experience: we cannot always return to an earlier state, but we can decide how to proceed. What persists is therefore not necessarily the original form, but the artist’s capacity to recognise and give meaning to what emerges through transformation.

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