

by Axel Lapp

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Very few exhibitions are as unpredictable and irritating as David Zink Yi's recent show in Berlin. Expecting to see and review a video installation in line with his recent works, themed on notions of cultural identity as expressed through music or food, I found myself confronted by several monumental ceramics of an octopus's tentacles.

It almost felt as if the gallery space had been used to stage an ancient myth, as if an imaginary seafarer or knight had fought his way through these rooms, slaying a giant kraken and rescuing a maiden or a ship, or whatever was worth rescuing in the white space of the gallery. The beast's eight cut-off tentacles remain scattered around the floor; the story seems to have progressed elsewhere. Though there is no story. Besides the physical objects, there is no indication of their meaning, or of a possible narrative.

There is not even a sense of bloodshed. The tentacles look neither severed nor wounded. At the points where you'd expect them to have been cut from a body, their surface appears smooth, as if each tentacle was an entity in itself. As objects, they are seductively beautiful: shiny and deep red in colour with white suckers and white markings on their surface. As the size of the kiln determines the size of the ceramics, several of them are pieced together from two parts, the joints concealed by convolutions and overlappings.

Before attending art school, David Zink Yi had trained as a wood carver. The sculptural form, therefore, is not new to him. He knows how to build a form and how to organise its structure. It is the material that is so astonishing here – although since this installation is dated 2000-2003, Zink Yi has obviously had some time to come to terms with its peculiarities. It is in fact not too difficult to distinguish which tentacles were made earlier than others, with a certain clumsiness giving way to skilfulness in the workmanship (the suckers, for example, range from knobby in finish to very smooth, almost like saucers).

The year 2000 might also provide a clue, why Zink Yi started to work with ceramics. In a video installation of that year, *El Festejo* – in which a person of mixed African and Chinese descent talks about the different forms of heritage – an intercut displays the sentence: 'The memory is always there especially in the food and my mothers porcelain.' This is followed by filmed images of Chinese porcelain figures, of a small Buddha and a naturalistic fish.

In this context, the sculptural installation of the tentacles can be perceived as a representation of two of the most potent conveyors of individual memory, as defined by the artist: food and craft objects. These tentacles trigger the artist's recollections of his own and his cultural heritage, and the memories of other people of a similar background.

In the end, this treatment of the subject is not too different from Zink Yi's video works. Whereas he usually concentrates on a small part of the body that is seen to interact with the basic materials of cultural production, he is here interacting himself. And instead of filming the interaction and presenting it through the filter of documentary, he shows the resulting object – albeit so enlarged that the original sources are almost unrecognisable.