

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Fragile Lines

By Peipei Yu



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Dr Peipei Yu
Co-researcher:	Professor Bashir Makhoul
Name of Output:	Fragile Lines
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/5387/
Output Type:	L– Artefact; large scale wall installation in group exhibition
Year and mode of dissemination:	<i>Today's Documents: A Stitch in Time</i> , group exhibition, Today Art Museum Beijing, China, 11 December 2019 – 27 June 2020
Key Words:	Boundaries, ceramic, contemporary art, installation, identity

Synopsis

‘Fragile Lines’ is a research output by Dr Peipei Yu consisting of a large scale (7m x 2.8m) wall installation of 112 glazed porcelain tiles. Together the glazed tiles present an abstracted world map based on digital layering and manipulation of different cartographic representations of the world.

The source maps used in the research were different projections from various periods of history put together in such a way as to become unrecognisable and indecipherable. The finished image is intended to refer to the history of abstract modernist painting and the forms of abstraction used in cartography and decorative ceramics. The arrangement of the tiles also creates a grid which refers to the use of the grid in abstract modernism, maps and decorative tiles. At the same time the material (porcelain) refers to the literal referent of maps – that is the surface of the earth. The tiles were

produced by Yu in a ceramics factory in Jingdezhen, which is China’s oldest and largest producer of porcelain ceramics.

The finished piece, although a stand-alone work, was initially developed to be exhibited at Today Art Museum, Beijing, in dialogue with Professor Bashir Makhoul’s floor installation ‘Fata Morgana’ which was also made from glazed ceramics. Makhoul’s work comes from research centred on Palestinian contemporary practice in the context of global art whereas Yu’s ‘Fragile Lines’ takes a specifically Chinese approach and it is within the global context of the exhibition that the two works interact.

This portfolio includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It also includes images of the creation and realisation of the work and its installation in the exhibition.

Context

The title 'Fragile Lines' refers partly to the fact that the tiles, which are only 3mm thick, are literally fragile but also to the fragility of political borders in globalisation. Yu was conscious of the idea that the surface of the earth is made of tectonic plates and the precarity of human settlements on the fault lines.

The connection between fragile political borders and geological fault lines is deliberately implicit rather than explicit and was intended as a hidden element within the work. Neither kinds of lines can be seen in real life and are only made visible to us through graphic representation on maps and geological charts. In fact, political borders often only exist at all as lines on maps, linking to Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of 'imagined communities' in which national borders may be arbitrary but national identity is formed as a potent socio-political construct. Indeed, these invisible lines have a powerful and sometimes catastrophic effect on peoples' lives through events such as wars, migration and earthquakes. These are local events that have global or transnational repercussions. The work aims to bring these ideas to the surface as an aesthetic, phenomenological encounter. The fragility of the tiles and the way in which their edges overlap is immediately apparent. The familiarity of the domestic, functional and decorative material is important, as is the scale.

This idea was intended to be further implied by its position in the exhibition *A Stitch in Time*. The fourth iteration of *Today's Documents*, a major exhibition held every three years by

Beijing's Today Art Museum, *A Stitch in Time* was co-curated by Jonathan Harris and Huang Du. The theme sought to address recent global social, political, economic and cultural changes and brought together 37 international artists. In particular, 'Fragile Lines' was developed and exhibited in dialogue with Bashir Makhoul's 'Fata Morgana', which is a version of his series of works based on precarious human settlements. Makhoul's approach, as a Palestinian artist and researcher, juxtaposed with Yu's specifically Chinese approach in 'Fragile Lines', exemplified the global scope of the exhibition.

The piece is also in dialogue more widely with other contemporary artists working with ceramics such as the Korean sculptor Yeesoogyung who works with found ceramic shards. She fuses them together with gold leaf into organic forms and her method draws attention to the broken irregular edges of the shards. Lei Xue works with fine hand painted porcelain using these traditional classical techniques to produce profane objects such as crushed beer cans or broken leaking pots. There are other artists working at the edges of craft or using ceramics as a figurative medium, but in 'Fragile Lines' Yu's production method points more towards industry rather than craft and is intended to fuse the aesthetic experience of the material with the political and conceptual.

REFERENCES

Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.



(a) 465 million years ago



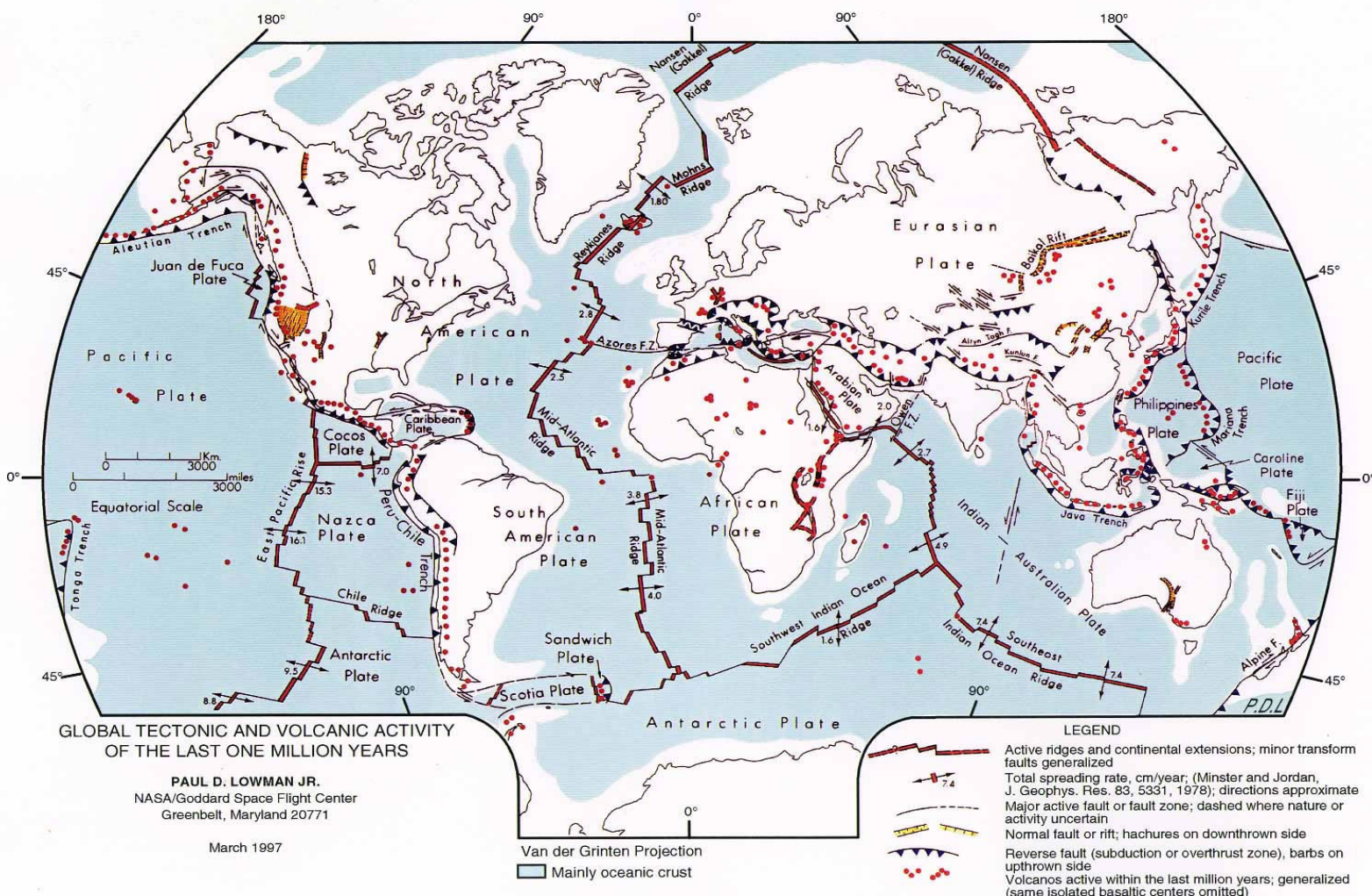
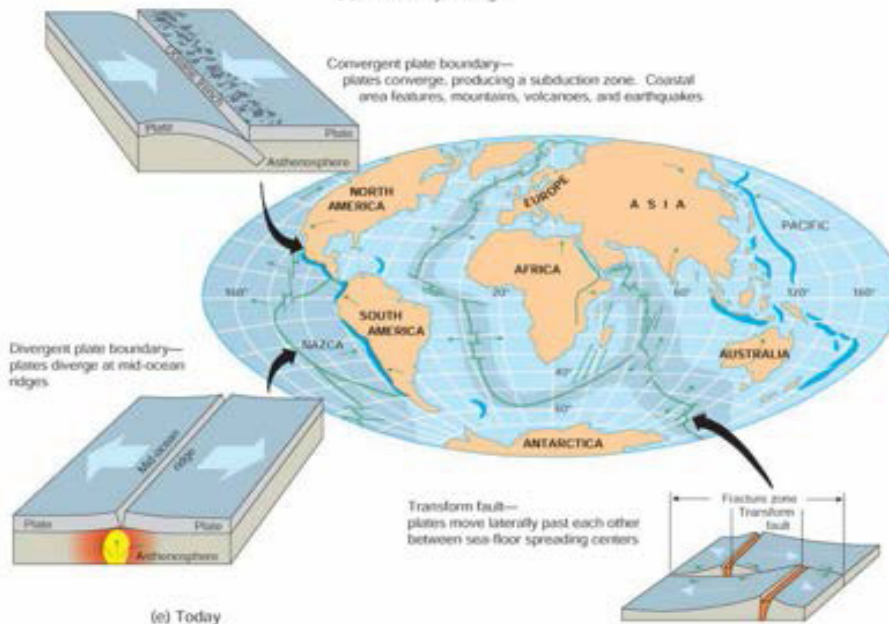
(d) 65 million years ago



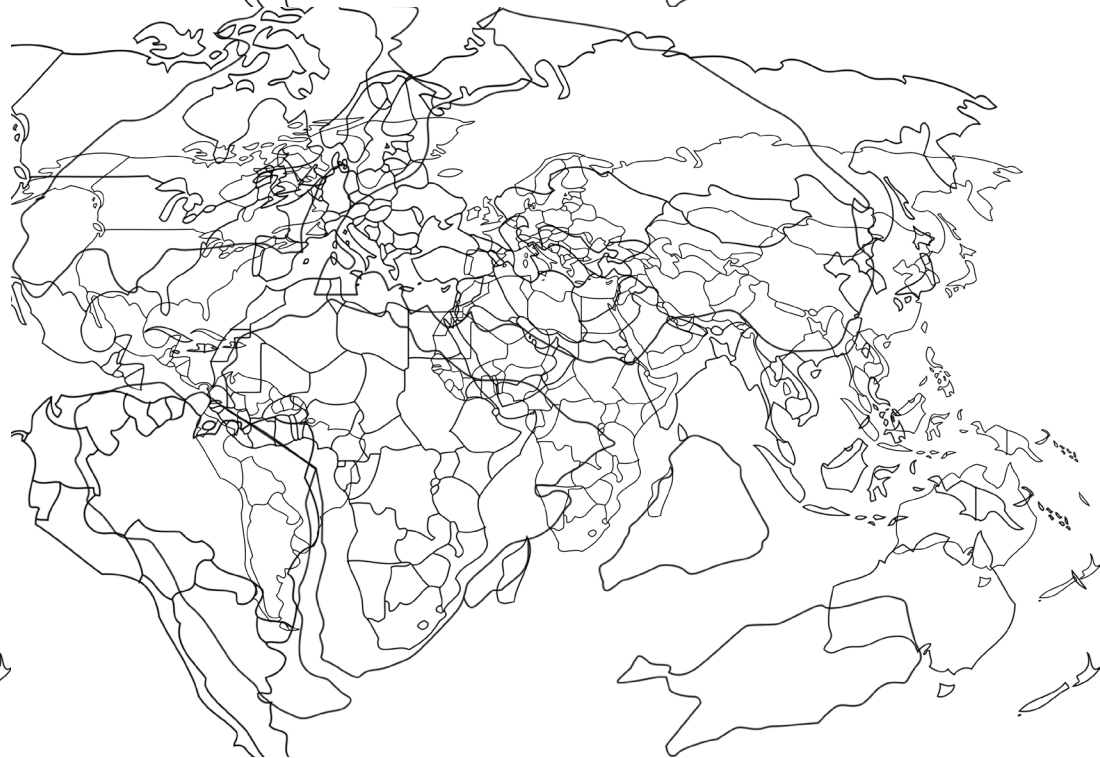
(b) 225 million years ago



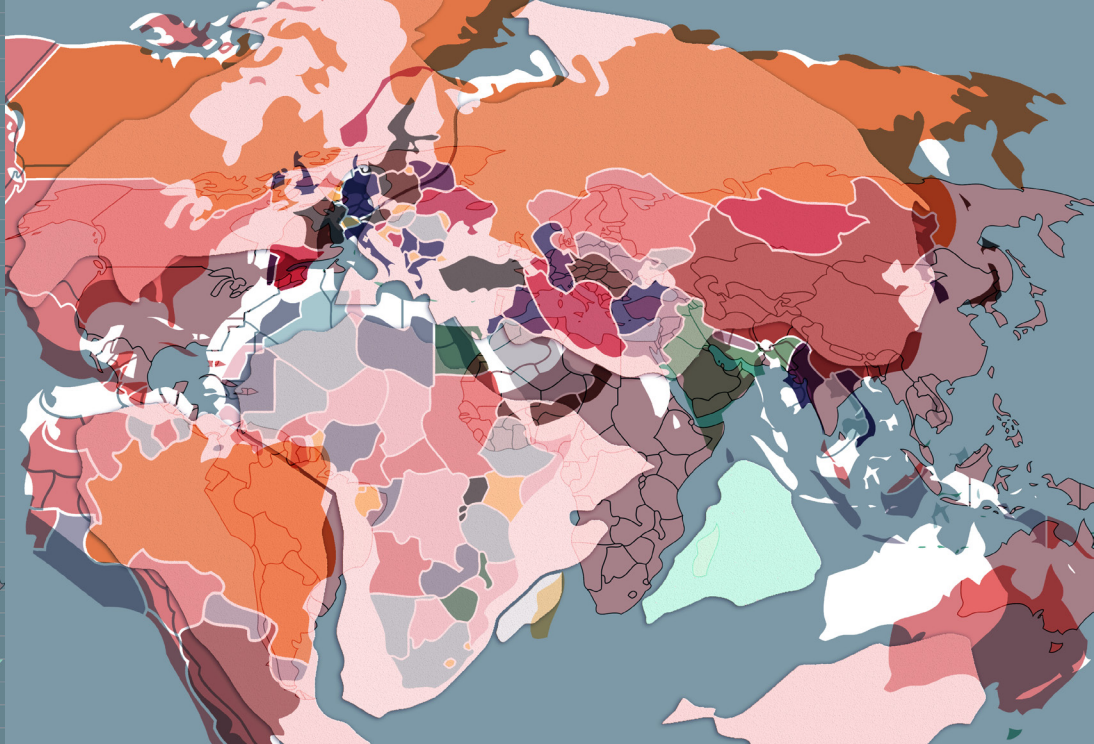
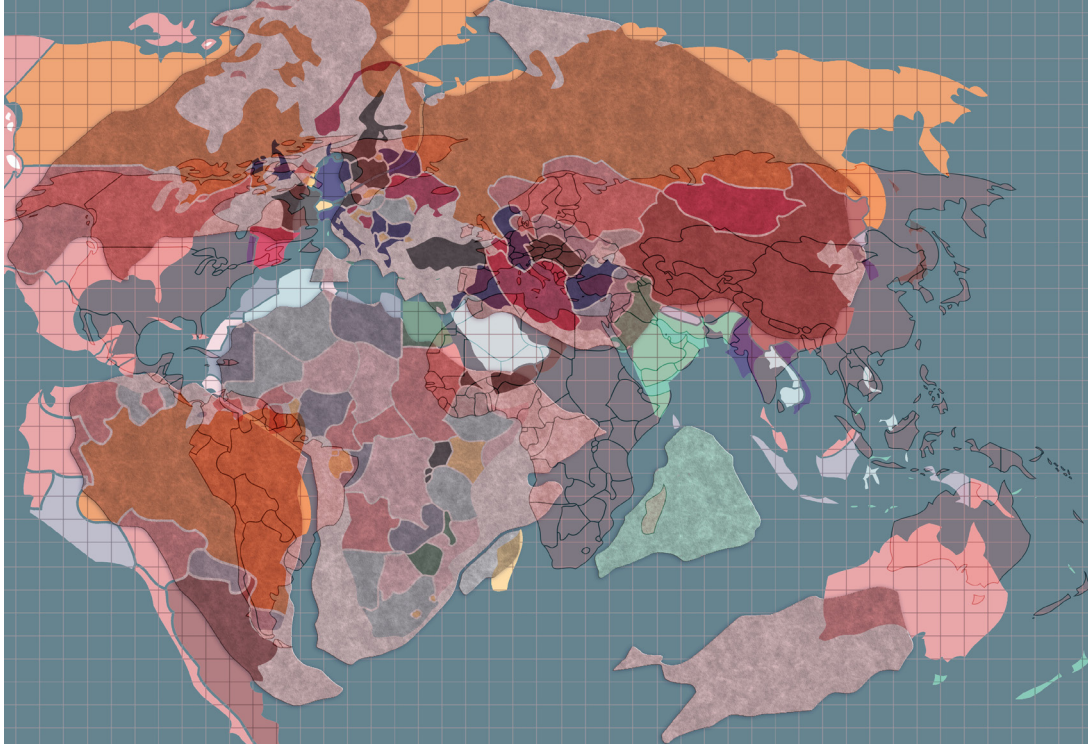
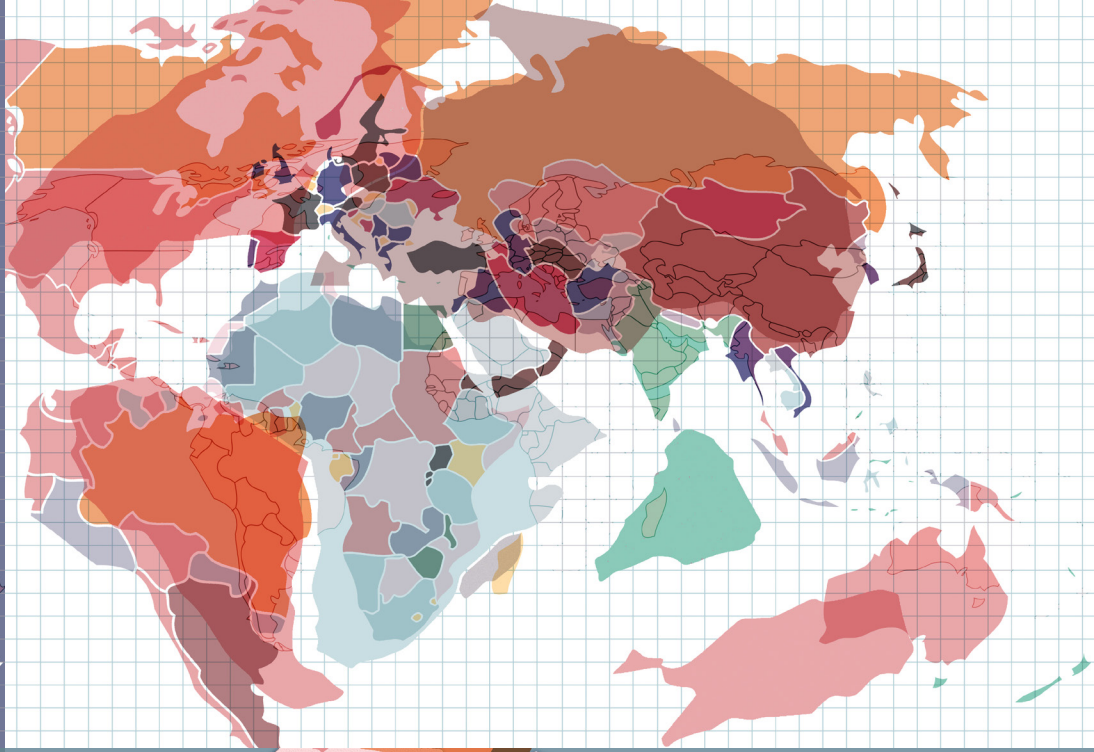
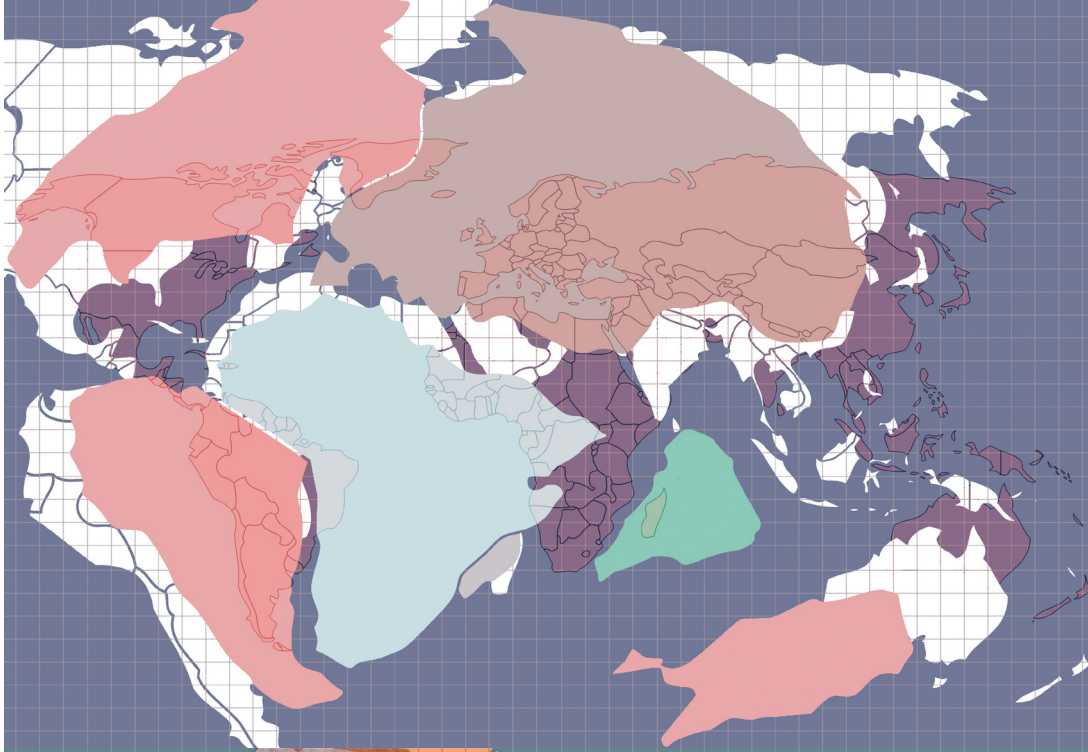
(c) 135 million years ago



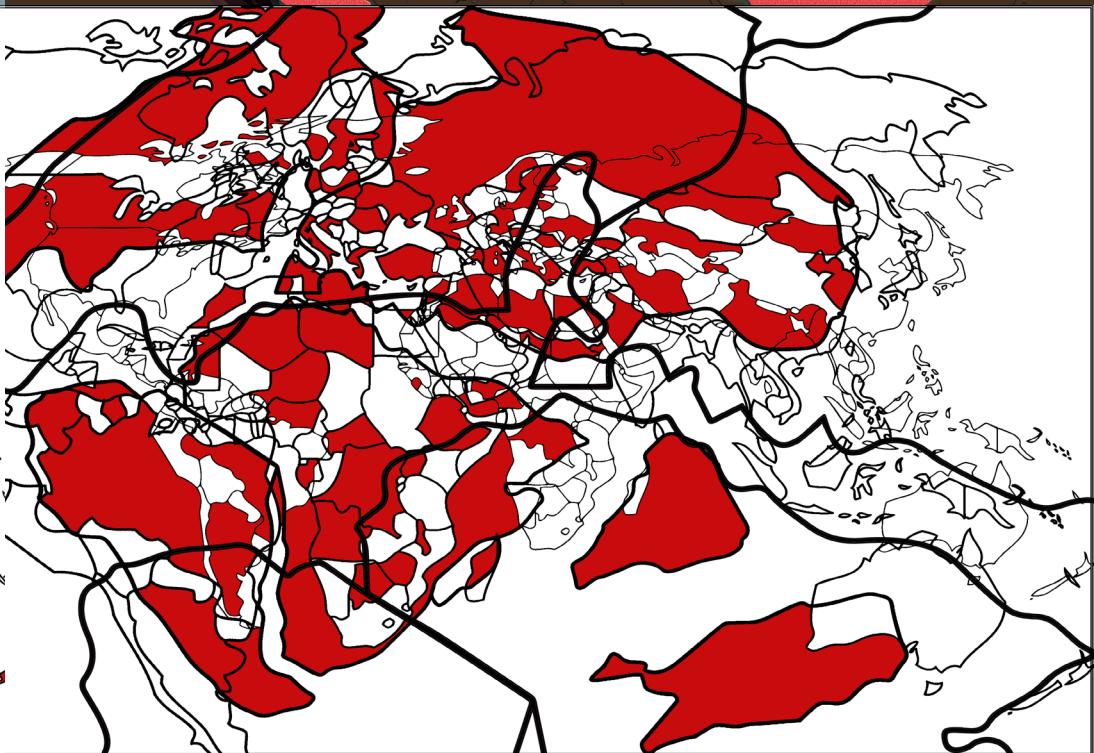
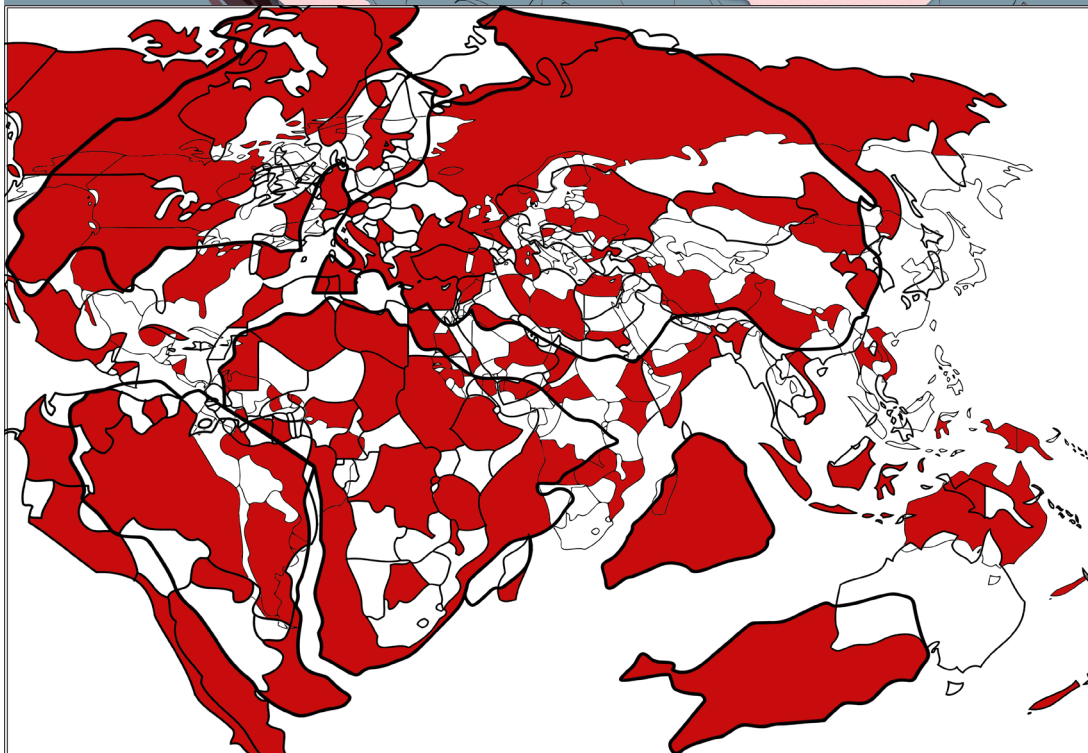
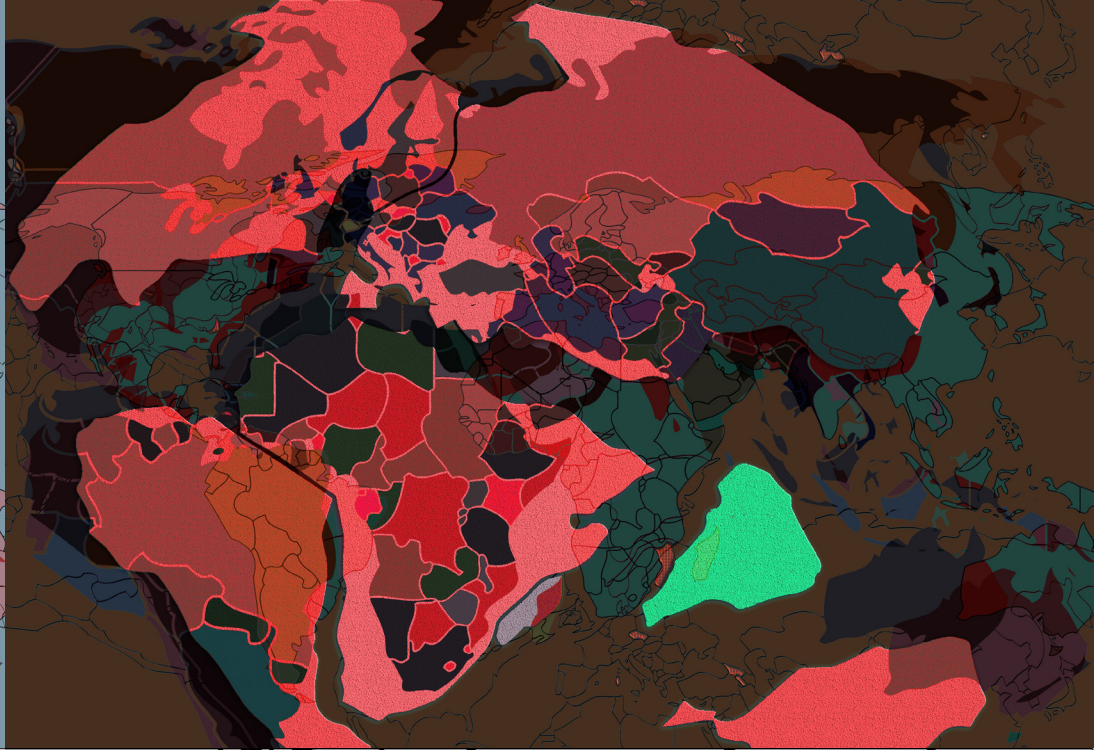
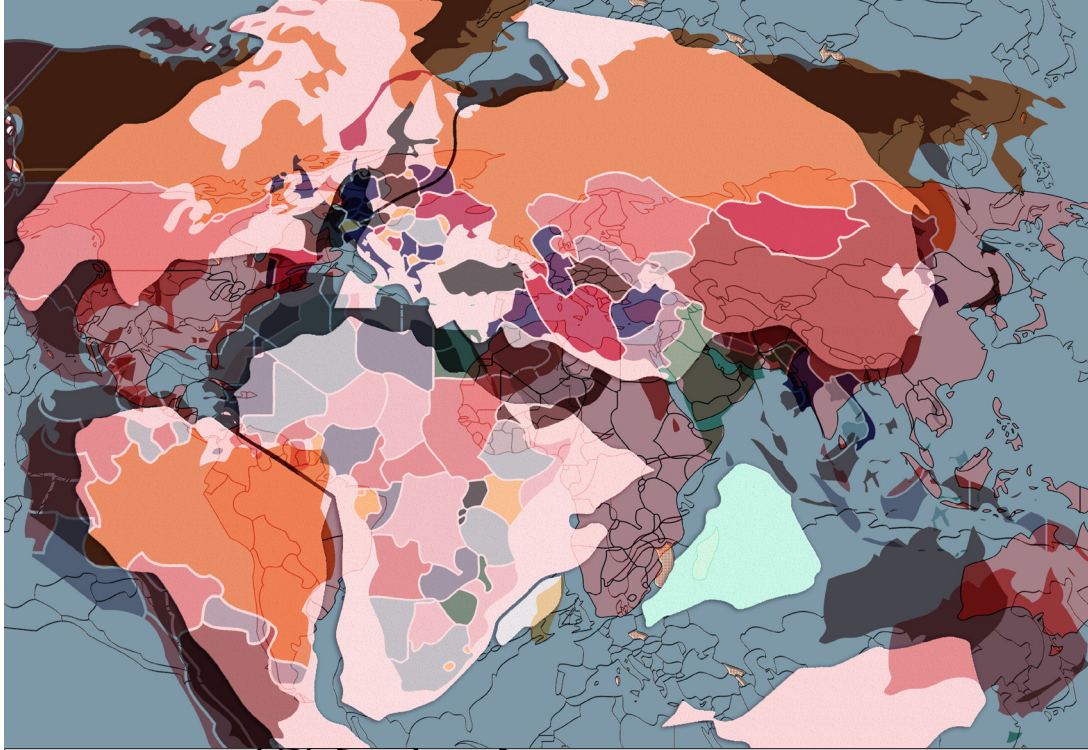
Images from initial research into the movement of tectonic plates



*Development of drawings based on
tectonic plate movement*



Development of images based on tectonic plate movement



Development of design based on tectonic plate movement

Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

How can traditional production methods in the Chinese ceramics industry be used effectively in a critically reflective contemporary art practice?

How can the production process and materiality of porcelain be used to implicitly communicate ideas related to geopolitics?

Research aims:

To reveal the intersections between traditional, culturally specific skills and modes of production and globalised cultural production

To test the ability of contemporary art to produce ways of thinking about the abstract political globe and its relationship to the literal, material globe on which we live

To extend and expand the political uses of ceramics in contemporary art

Research Methods and Process

Yu's approach to research methods is that of reflective practice, aiming to allow the tacit knowledge, implicit in the processes and materials, to emerge through critical reflection. The conceptual framing of the piece was developed at the same time as learning the production processes in a ceramics factory in Jingdezhen. The finished piece was achieved through this combination of old forms of commercial production, digital imaging and conceptual art.

The work began with her interest in the production methods of porcelain ceramics in Jingdezhen and in the history, landscape and culture of the city as the 'Capital of Porcelain'. She worked and learned alongside the skilled women workers in a factory there in order to explore ways in which a work of art could be produced using their methods.

At the same time Yu was in dialogue with Makhoul about producing a piece for an exhibition in which he was showing a ceramic installation, 'Fata Morgana'. This led to a collaborative stage of the research process as Yu was interested in the way Makhoul had explored political ideas related to identity using ceramics in this piece. In

particular, they discussed the ideas of borders in relation to identity.

As a result of her experience in Jingdezhen and conversations with Makhoul, Yu began to develop the idea of the edges of tiles as a kind of border that creates a grid. She was also experimenting with coloured glazes and developed the idea of lines and areas of colour crossing the grid of the tiles in similar way to borders and land masses crossing the grid of a map.

As a source material for the glaze painting Yu used a variety of world maps that applied different cartographic projections or from various periods of history that showed the changing borders between countries and the shifting empires across time. By digitally overlaying these maps and distorting them – bearing in mind that all maps of the globe are necessarily distorted – an image that was no longer recognisable as a map began to emerge but that still used the graphic language of a map. At the same time the image resembled aspects of Western modernist abstract painting. It was at this point, through a process of critical reflection, that the conceptual framing of the work fused with the material and production process towards the aim of the research.



Detail of the development of the tiles



Detail of the development of the tiles



Detail of the development of the tiles



Detail of the development of the tiles

Research Contribution and Recognition

Research insights and contribution:

The research reveals the intersections between traditional, culturally specific skills and modes of production and globalised cultural production, as well as extending and expanding the political uses of ceramics in contemporary art.

Further dissemination:

A book - *The fourth Today's Document: A Stitch in Time* - has been published along with the exhibition in which 'Fragile Lines' is featured.

The work was disseminated extensively through national and regional press coverage. For example, images of 'Fragile Lines' and 'Fata Morgana' were used throughout press releases, as in China Culture and China Daily:

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/13/WS5e1bcc5aa310cf3e35584155.html>

An interview with co-curator Huang Du considers the themes behind the exhibition:

<https://www.zcool.com.cn/article/ZMTA5MjcwMA==.html>

In a comprehensive exploration of the exhibition both curators provide insight into the exhibition and works:

<https://new.qq.com/omn/20191213/20191213A0AV4L00.html>

In a sustained analysis of the exhibition, one writer suggests that 'The artists participating in this exhibition responded to the theme of the exhibition from different angles. Their works show the influence and problems that globalization has brought to the world's economy, politics, and culture since the 1990s':

<http://wap.art.ifeng.com/?app=system&controller=artmobile&action=content&contentid=3493344>



Tiles awaiting installation



Installation of the tiles



Fragile Lines installed in A Stitch in Time exhibition



BACKGROUND
Fragile Lines

FOREGROUND
Bashir Makhoul's work 'Fata Morgana'



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COVER IMAGES

Fragile Lines installed in A Stitch in Time exhibition

