

YEESOOKYUNG

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ROBERT C. MORGAN

ABSENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE: READING THE WORK OF YEESOOKYUNG

Yeesookyung is a conceptually-based artist who works out of Seoul, Korea. She holds a preeminent reputation among patrons and scholars in her own country with a steadily growing reputation in many distinguished European, Japanese, and American collections. Considered by many as a significant new presence in bringing the legacy of Korean traditional forms into focus, she deploys unique strategies of appropriation in conjunction with a variety of mediums to produce works that reveal a carefully premeditated irony. For example, her critically acclaimed ceramic works, titled *Translated Vase*, are founded on a conceptual practice in which she assembles complex structures using shards of broken vessels that have been discarded. These vessels, though recently constructed by artisans working in various ceramic villages throughout Korea, are based on original designs formerly used in porcelain vases made during the Goryeo (918–1392, fig. 2) and Joseon (1392–1897, fig. 3) dynasties. To ensure quality of the reproductions, artisans are asked to destroy those vases that reveal any signs of inferiority.

The origin of Yee's work in ceramics began in 2001 with a work titled *Translated Vase Albisola*. This developed soon after the artist encountered a verse by the Korean poet, Kim Song-ok, "Ode to a Porcelain Vase."¹ This led Yee to



Fig. 1. Yeesookyung's studio, 2013



create twelve white porcelain vases painted in blue, typical of the Joseon influence on European ceramics in the eighteenth century. To achieve this, the artist employed an Italian ceramicist, Anna Maria, to translate her impressions of the “Ode” into the design and production of the vases. The result was a series of twelve Italian versions of a Joseon vase, majestically produced according to the artist’s instructions, but highly ambiguous, if not meaningless, in content. What stands forth, however, is the fact that the stylistic exchanges that once occurred between East and West along the Silk Road are now laminated together as an integral part of the conceptual design within the accompanying production process. *Translated Vase Albisola* began with a series of translated impressions

Fig. 2. Artist/maker unknown, Korean, *Vase (Maebyeong)*, Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), 12th century, porcellaneous stoneware with incised decoration under celadon glaze, 16 x 9 ½ inches. Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. Purchased with the Fiske Kimball Fund and the Marie Kimball Fund, 1974.



and finished as a series of twelve crossbred utilitarian objects detached from their cultural origins.² In addition, they might function as well-crafted examples of exquisite décor suspended in time and place, ambiguous, if not negligible, on the level of connoisseurship. One may further discover a link to understanding the fascination associated with Chinoiserie as found in the Palace of Oranienbaum in Dessau (1683, fig. 4), which was the site of one of Yeosookyung’s most intriguing installations, verging on the precipice between kitsch, craft, deconstruction, and fine art.³

Together with her symmetrical scroll paintings, influenced by the ancient Taoist cave paintings from the Goguryeo kingdom in the North, dating back to the

Fig. 3. Artist/maker unknown, Korean, *Bottle with Chrysanthemums and Orchids*, Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), late 18th to early 19th century, porcelain with underglaze cobalt blue decoration; gold lacquer repair on body, 12 x 7 inches. Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. Gift of Dr. Andrew Byoung Soo Kim and Mrs. Wan Kyun Rha Kim in honor of James and Agnes Kim, 2006.



first century A.D., and Buddhist flame paintings from the later Goryeo period, *Translated Vase* seems to make a seamless conceptual fit.⁴ In both series, the artist forges an anti-aesthetic in her paradoxical reconciliation with the present. For example, the symmetrical scroll paintings embody references to Bodhisattva figures and attendants juxtaposed with indigenous Mudang shamans, the latter going back centuries before any kingdom or dynasty occupied the Korean peninsula.⁵ Her timely approach to sculptural assemblage and painterly montage (or vice versa) suggests not only a deconstructive process at work, but an inexorable patience as she implicates a slow release of energy (*qi*) that informs such paintings, once given to forms generated through the skills of anonymous Korean masters from past centuries. Her work is less a manner of engendering a style than producing a host of oppositional fragments. This allows the work to come to terms with the visual language embedded within these indigenous forms as she foregrounds them in a lyrically and provocative relationship to the present.

A clear reading of these forms may have been lost in recent times, given the difficult history of Korea following the Japanese occupation (1910–1945), and, in recent years, the intrusion of mediated global trends. However, the power of Yeesookyung's works continues to astonish national and international viewers.⁶ In her recent works, one finds a consistent, albeit subtle, subtle reference to the *qi* through her perception, craft, agility, and a nearly inscrutable precision and concentration on detail. Her attention to particulars reveals an acute sense of tension and balance in her *Translated Vases* consistent with her broader use of symmetry and rupture that deconstructs the past. Whether Buddhist or Neo-Confucian icons and figurations, the space is filled with evocative ganglia and provocative interstitial happenings. Given the variation of medium, material, scale,

and surface, Yeesoogyung offers a series of complex investigations, especially in welding the cracks and fissures of shattered porcelain (and celadon) using epoxy and gold (*geum*).⁷

In her decontextualized Buddhist paintings (fig. 5), Yeesoogyung redefines pictorial abutments of shape, figurations, and dismantled symbolic referents from histories of past kingdoms and dynasties. Her application of floral designs and filigree resonate with the multifarious infusions of global and transcultural traces. Evocations gluttled with a subterranean infestation of beauty mark every conduit, every linear motif, all magically woven into a palpably refined, sensuously endowed crescendo of ecstasy. Her elegantly cultivated semiotic discourse represents a sequence of caricatures, a collision of cultural signifiers in the artist's search to rediscover the authenticity and ironies embedded in the past. In so doing, Yeesoogyung has indirectly, yet forcefully reopened a discourse into the meaning of Korean identity today.

Educated in the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University, one of the best, and clearly most formidable institutions of higher learning in the Republic of Korea, Yeesoogyung received her BFA in 1987 and her MFA in 1989. During this period, French poststructural theory, along with major writings of the Frankfurt School and cultural feminism, were slowly making their way into Korean translation. Although the writings of Duchamp and the Conceptualists of the 1960s were already known, the translations lagged behind. Yet Korean art similarly shifted away from purely formal ideas in the visual arts toward an extended range of content focused on language.⁸ The rubric of "postmodernism" became a standard term for anything that defied Modernism and did not reduce artistic practice to a particular medium.



Fig. 5. *Flame Variation 1-2* (detail), 2012



I mention this only to suggest that while these ideas were burgeoning and clearly in vogue at the time Yeosookyung was at Seoul National, her recent work represents the the full extent of their power and potential impact in relation to her evolving methods of deconstruction. After exposure to two important residencies in New York in the 1990s, her conceptual practice came into focus. It soon followed that instead of pursuing a resistance to Modernism independent of her cultural heritage, Yeosookyung embraced Western theory less as a truth than a method.⁹ In this way, she began to investigate the traditional parameters of language and form in Korean culture. This was achieved by way of appropriating traditional objects, specifically ceramics, as a kind of conservative disguise, a concealed

Fig. 6. Discarded ceramic shards

radicality on the verge of regeneration, a transgression, in some sense, that leads to transformation.

The broken shards of white porcelain and celadon offered a fertile field of investigation. Several villages throughout the Republic of Korea have teams of master artisans on staff to produce replicas according to the original specifications, used predominantly in the mid Joseon dynasty. The largest is in Icheon, southeast of Seoul, which has become a major outlet, in fact, a veritable corporation. Others include Yeosu, Gwangju, Danyang, Hadong, Mungyeong, Gangjin, and Buan. Given the requirements for perfection, only a small percentage of the ceramic works produced actually reach the final cut. The rest are destroyed, thrown into ceramic graveyards (fig. 6), as it were. Yeosookyung became interested in the rejects and how to transform these shards into works of art. She devised a system based on a ceramic core by which to gradually adhere the fragments with epoxy. The shards are constructed in relation to one another until they achieve an *embodied form*. I emphasize this term given the artist's emphasis on the volume or space once contained by the vessels as reforming themselves into another body, a Buddha, for instance, or a form manifesting the Sanskrit concept of *sunyata*, or "pregnancy of the void."¹⁰ Less detached as a purely deconstructive process, the more recent *Translated Vase* constructions of the past six years further suggest the notion of moving from or through space as contained in a vessel, a reversal of an embodied space as in *dhyana*, towards a paradoxical form of transcendence that retains its materiality.¹¹

The concept of symmetry abounds in Yeosookyung's work of the past three years, ranging from the exalted faux-mysticism in her paintings, such as *Flame Variation* (2012, pp. 49, 53, 57), to the *Polaris* installation from the same year,



featuring a mirror-like ensemble of cast resin figures showing young girls with animals, a theme also present in the paintings. In addition to the Taoist and Buddhist-inspired hanging scroll paintings and her recent figurative sculpture, there is yet another recent variation on conceptual symmetry found in her re-staging of traditional dance works, previously destined for the eyes of elite literati during dynastic times. The women who generally performed in these dances were known as *kisaeng* who were highly educated professional entertainers and occasionally prostitutes.¹² Donned in traditional Korean *hanbok* or long floating gowns, their slow graceful movements are sustained throughout the dance. The video document of one of these performances, titled *Twin Dance* (pp. 44–47)

Fig. 7. *Chen Chog Heruka and Spirits of the Bardo*, Tibet, Mongolia or China, 18th–19th century, colors and gold on cloth with cloth mounting, Nyingma Religious Order. Collection Newark Museum, Newark, NJ, The Heeramaneck Collection. Purchase 1969, The Members' Fund 69.34.

involves two women who pose and move as if they were exact reflections of one another.

Based on my observation, this slowness of effect is embodied in the consciousness of the female performers. Part of this is technical due to the fact that each woman must maintain an exact opposite reflection of the other. This would be relatively inconceivable if the tempo were to accelerate. But the contemplative aspect of the dance relative requires a consistency with the sounds of traditional instruments, such as the *Gayageum*. These ancient percussive sounds also resemble Sanskrit Buddhist chants, performed by monks in Korea. The sounds are slow and deliberate, assured and steady. Their effect is essential as they parallel the movements of the dancers. The dance begins with the same pace that it finishes, just as the Buddhist chant begins and ends on the exact tempo. The symmetry in the *Twin Dance* is omnipresent, and therefore, increases one's depth of contemplation in the process of watching and listening to this highly complex, yet indefatigably complete performance. Time stands still.

Robert C. Morgan is an art historian, critic, painter, and lecturer. He is Professor Emeritus in Art History at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the first recipient of the Arcale award in international art criticism in Salamanca (Spain). Author of many books, monographs, and literally hundreds of essays, Professor Morgan was selected as a Fulbright Senior Scholar in 2005, where he lived in Gwangju, researching the traditional arts in their relationship to Korean contemporary art. In 2007, he was the first American critic to be formally invited to lecture in the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979, where a book of his essays was translated into Farsi. Another collection of his essays, *Reflections on the Condition of Recent Chinese Art*, was translated into Mandarin, and published by Hebei Educational Publishers, Beijing (2013).

NOTES

1. Kim Song-ok (1920–2004).
2. The work was included in the International Ceramics Biennale, Albisola, 2001.
3. Yeesoookyung's exhibition at the palace in Oranienburg, Germany was in 2009.
4. The Sung Dynasty in China goes from 960–1279. However the Goryeo Dynasty in Korea continues until 1392, which encompasses the Yuan (Mongol period) from 1279–1368, into the beginning of the Ming dynasty.
5. Choi Joon-sik, "Koreans and Shamanism" in *Seoul: A Window into Korean Culture*. Seoul, Republic of Korea: HER ONE MEDIA, 2009; pp. 185–195.
6. During the Japanese occupation, production of traditional vases was not encouraged and severely diminished throughout Korea. This began to change following the Korea War in 1953 and developed to new heights in the late 1970s with the surge in the economy. In more recent years, the global marketing of contemporary art has impacted the rise of ceramic artisans in Korea. Traditionally, one important means by which to ensure quality in art was by delimiting production; the other was connoisseurship related to crafting objects according to specification.
7. The phonetic sounds of the characters used for the English words "crack" and "gold" are homonyms in Korean (pronounced "geum").
8. The shift away from form to language was intrinsic in Conceptual Art. See Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy" in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*. New York: Dutton, 1972.
9. This distinction runs through Modern philosophy from Heidegger to Habermas to Sartre, among others. I mention it only to suggest that Yeesoookyung's "truth" does not depart from her Korean heritage but is very much connected to it. The sense of irony, however, suggest a means by which she is able not only to deconstruct, but retrieve important aspects of culture that are in danger of disappearing through hypermediation, which implies the loss of history.
10. For an in-depth interpretation, see William Barrett, editor, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*. New York: Doubleday, 1956.
11. The complexity of this argument is discussed in D. T. Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No Mind*. York Beach: Red Wheel/Weiser, 1972 (original publication, 1957).
12. Emphasis should be given to the extraordinary intellectual rigor, the depth of cultural understanding, and physical training required of these women who entertained in some of the most distinguished architectural palaces and settings of the Joseon Dynasty. These would include the Gyeonghoeru and Sujeongjeon Pavilions in Seoul, often reserved by royalty for special occasions where the leading singers, dancers, and instrumentalists performed.