

Ceramics

MONTHLY



Malcolm Mobutu Smith

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departments

- 8 from the editor
- 10 letters *from readers*
- 14 answers *from the CM technical staff*
- 16 suggestions *from readers*
 - 16 Tip of the Month: *passive technology*
- 20 upfront
 - 20 Exhibitions
 - 30 Reviews
- 152 call for entries
 - 152 International Exhibitions
 - 153 United States Exhibitions
 - 153 Regional Exhibitions
 - 154 Fairs and Festivals
- 156 new books
 - Lithophanes *by Margaret Carney*
 - Smoke Firing: Contemporary Artists and Approaches *by Jane Perryman*
- 158 calendar
 - 158 Conferences
 - 158 Solo Exhibitions
 - 158 Group Ceramics Exhibitions
 - 162 Ceramics in Multimedia Exhibitions
 - 164 Fairs, Festivals and Sales
 - 165 Workshops
 - 168 International Events
- 174 classified advertising
- 175 index to advertisers
- 176 comment
 - What Do We Seek? What Are We Offered?
by Jack Troy

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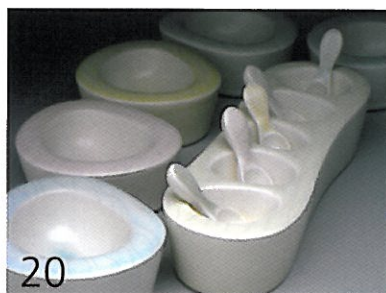
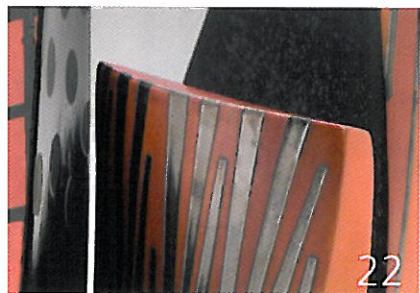
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Clockwise from top left: Ro, Hae Sin's *Square* (6 pieces), 4 in. (10 cm) in height, 2002. Choi, Sung Jae's *Dawn*, 14 in. (35 cm) in height, 2001. Kim, Dae Hoon's *Stuffed Remembrance (God's Promise)*, 6 in. (16½ cm) in height, 2003. Guac, Roh Hoon's *Form-Series 1*, 30 in. (74 cm) in height, 2003. Kim, Jiu Kyoung's *Netting Clay I*, 35 in. (90 cm) in height, 1997. Kim, Dae Hoon's *Stuffed Remembrance (Human Oblivion)*, 16 in. (40 cm) in height, 2003.

From the Fire: A Survey of Contemporary Korean Ceramics

by Dorothy M. Joiner

Praise for the unpretentious beauty of Korean ceramics has sometimes come from unexpected sources. The renowned Japanese potter Hamada Shoji (1894–1978) said “that in the whole world there are no pots which are so imbued with the spirit of a people as these, particularly the Yi [Choson] works. Between Japanese life and the pot, ‘taste’ emerges; with the Chinese, ‘beauty’ creates a distance, but in the Korean works the object contains the life of the people.” “From the Fire: A Survey of Contemporary Korean Ceramics,” brings to the U.S. the “life” of this nation as expressed in clay. Featuring 108 art works by 54 ceramists, it is the largest such collection to be shown in this country. A microcosm of Korea’s past and present, the exhibition demonstrates an abiding respect for tradition at the same time that it reveals an excitement in charting new directions.

The first group of works, termed by Curator Cho, Chung Hyun “Tradition Transformed,” offers time-honored though updated techniques, together with reflections of the country’s religious and cultural heritage. Kim, Yik Yung’s *Faceted Square Bowl II* is a striking reinterpretation of the spare white porcelain ritual vessels initially reserved for the nobility during the Choson Dynasty. Exquisitely simple, Kim’s bowl rises at an oblique angle from a low rectangular base, the short sides gently curved, the surface discreetly faceted. Like its forebears, the modern work embodies the purity, frugality and lack of affectation advocated by Neo-Confucianism, the dominant cultural philosophy introduced into Korea by the nobility during the 15th century.

Also reaching deep into Korean cultural history are the works inspired by a Daoist identification with nature and its concomitant freedom of expression. For *Dawn*, a sturdy, wide-lipped container, Choi,

Sung Jae covers a stoneware clay body with cream-colored slip and splashes hasty calligraphic markings on the surface with his fingers. Both the spontaneity and the seemingly cavalier application of slip are quintessential qualities of the punchong aesthetic. In the 16th century when Korean potters were forcibly transported to Japan, they brought with them the punchong style, thereby fostering Japan’s preference for natural materials and unaffected folk pottery, the widely known Mingei aesthetic.

Together with the use of conventional techniques is the recurrence of time-honored East Asian symbols. Lee, Kang Hyo employs the onggi method of paddling coils of clay into a spherical vessel with a wooden bat before decorating it with wide-eyed fish and lotus seed pods, titling it *My Garden*. A ubiquitous Korean symbol, the fish is associated with life and fertility because of its prodigious production of eggs and is also the emblem of enlightenment. Blooming unsullied above murky waters, the lotus, particularly in Buddhist thought, stands for purity and transcendence.

Kim, Soo Jeong further exploits the lotus’s symbolic richness in *Life-Lotus II*. Joining a rust-colored seed pod to a blossom curiously angled on its side, she sets this plexus on a sea-green platter with an undulating rim, scored with plant-like striations. Suggesting time past, present and future—the backdrop of life’s cycle—the lotus encapsulates the stages of its growth in the seed, the bud and the flower.

No less respectful of the past are the works of the second group: “Ceramic Sculpture.” Inspired by Neo-Confucian rituals for the dead, Jung, Yoo Kun elevates two purposively rough-hewn clay chairs on open squares. As offerings



Clockwise from top left: Lim, Moo Keun's *Mystery of God*, 7 in. (19 cm) in height, 2001. Kim, Soo Jeong's *Life-Lotus II*, 5 in. (12 cm) in height, 2003. Kwon, Shin's *Nest (Square)*, 30 in. (74 cm) in height, 2000. An, Sung Min's *Origins of Life*, 9 in. (24 cm) in height, 2003. Kim, Yik Yung's *Faceted Square Bowl II*, 6 in. (16 cm) in height, 2000. Joo, Ji Wan's *Celadon Box Series*, 6 in. (15 ½ cm) in height, 2001.

honoring deceased ancestors, the artist places a silver knife encased in acrylic on the seat of one and on the other a silver hair pin.

Christianity, which has grown phenomenally in Korea since the '50s, is also an inspiration to its clay artists. In *Stuffed Remembrance (Human Oblivion)*, Kim, Dae Hoon embeds the tines of a rusted pitchfork in a thick gray slab, its surface scarred with deep cracks, like parched earth. This dramatically austere image proclaims the curse of Adam and Eve that banished them from Eden and condemned them to till the harsh land.

Kim's complementary piece, *Stuffed Remembrance (God's Promise)*, offers the divine remedy for the curse, the promise of salvation recorded in Genesis. Inscribing the Biblical passage in English on a white clay tablet placed in a rough-sided box, the artist calls to mind the ancient custom of interring with the deceased a ceramic epitaph tablet recording birthday, area of origin and personal achievements.

Even in the Christian works, nonetheless, one sometimes senses the lingering echoes of a Daoist appreciation for the natural world. Kim Moo Keun's *Mystery of God* is a coarse, ruddy, sanchung clay body. A declivity near the center begins as a perfect circle, then lapses into a less defined shape. Resembling a mortar, the piece hints at "grinding," the diurnal movements of the divine throughout nature.

"Individual Directions," the third group of works, are intriguingly innovative creations. An, Sung Min's *Origins of Life* nods to her country's honored legacy of porcelain. But she eschews functionality, fashioning instead a paper-thin ovular shape with an irregular hole—as though cracked—at the smaller end, setting the egg at an angle near the edge

of an asymmetrical white base. Universally associated with creation, the egg in Chinese legend hatched the sky, the earth and the primal ancestor P'an Ku. Daoists, furthermore, used an egg to symbolize the Yin/Yang symbol, the germ of existence.

Two works aim at subverting clay's classic solidity. For *Form—Series I*, Guac, Roh Hoon flattens narrow strips of clay plaiting a bulbous, webbed configuration, allowing only hints of see-through visibility. And in *Netting Clay I*, Kim, Jiu Kyoung fashions a woman's blouse by wiring together myriad squiggles of white porcelain, adding a snowy cloth collar and cuffs. Similarly, *Netting Clay II* is a bikini and bra top assembled from "coins" of gleaming porcelain.

Much engages the sensibility in this exhibition: the predilection for the irregular, the spontaneous, the simple, the "pure." And much, too, can be learned about Korean life and history. Many artists espouse traditional techniques, beliefs and symbols, yet do so with a creative fervor that transforms the heritage. Others interpret relatively new beliefs, especially Christianity, in the light of their own indigenous legacy. The viewer experiences, as it were, the "life" of Korea.

"From the Fire" was recently on view at LaGrange Art Museum (www.lagrangeartmuseum.org) in LaGrange, Georgia, and will on view this fall at Denison University Art Gallery (www.denison.edu/campuslife/museum/) in Granville, Ohio.

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