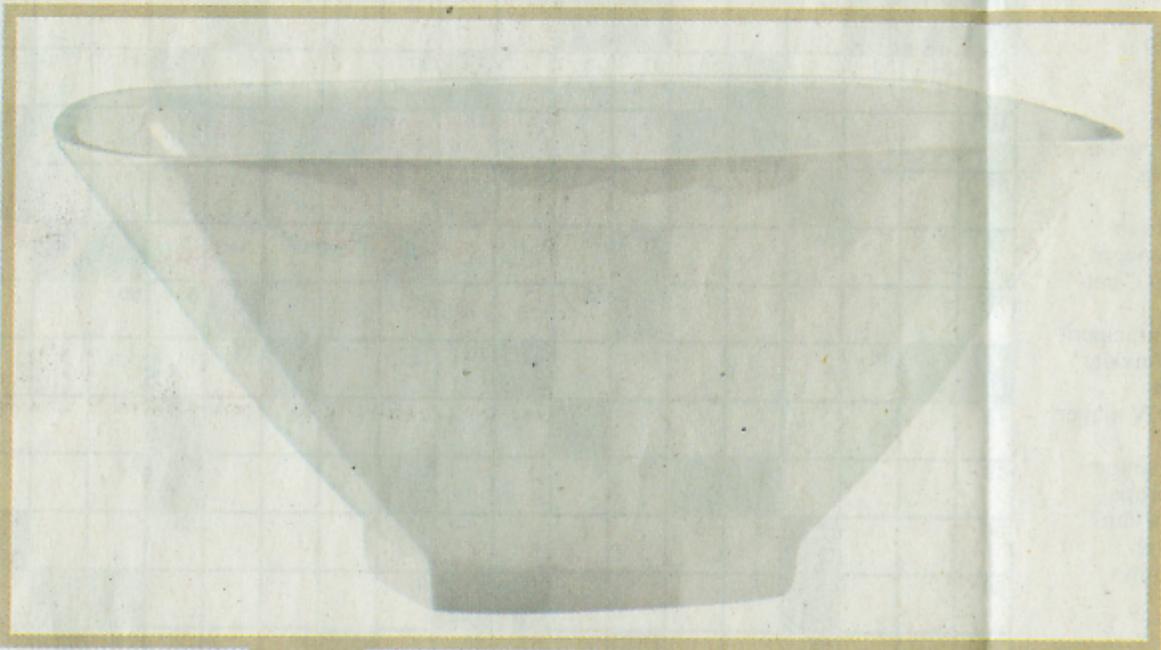


SUNDAY ARTS

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2006 ■ THE TIMES



Clockwise from left:

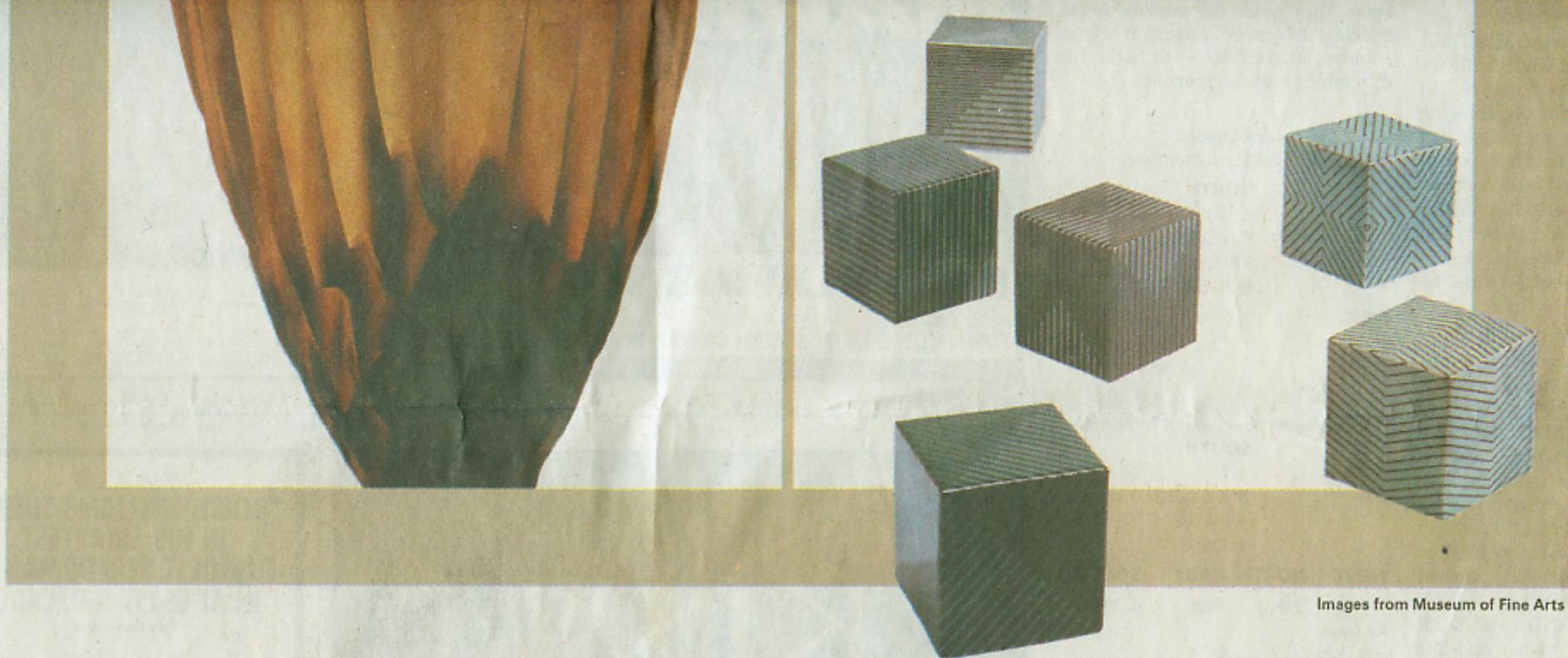
- Yik Yung Kim, *Faceted Square Bowl I*, 2000, porcelain clay body.
- Soo Jeong Kim, *Life-Lotus II*, 2003, celadon clay body.
- Ji Wan Joo, *Celadon Box Series*, 2001, porcelain clay body.
- Shin Kwon, *Nest*, stoneware clay body.

PREVIEW

FROM THE FIRE: CONTEMPORARY KOREAN

CERAMICS is at the Museum of Fine Arts, 255 Beach Drive NE, St. Petersburg, through Dec. 31. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$8, with discounts for others. (727) 896-2667 or www.fine-arts.org.





Images from Museum of Fine Arts

The shape of change

Korean ceramic artists are employing ancestral techniques with a contemporary twist, vividly illustrating how Korea has been reclaiming its cultural heritage.

BY LENNIE BENNETT | TIMES ART CRITIC

Ceramics are getting a big dusting-off in a country that cleaved to the old ways for centuries. "From the Fire: Contemporary Korean Ceramics" at the Museum of Fine Arts is a state-of-the-art survey with more than 100 works from 54 artists who are melding the old with the new in their kilns. It has been a long time coming.

Geography is often destiny for nations, and Korea's fate along those lines has been as a land-grab between its two aggressive neighbors, Japan and China. And now, let's face it, the United States, which for decades has had a strong military presence in the southern part of the divided country to keep the northern communists at bay.

All cultures are made more vibrant by absorbing foreign influences, but in Korea's case, the heavy-handed influence of its neighbors created a muting of its identity rather than an enhancement. In the past 50 years, Korea seems to be reclaiming its cultural heritage and nowhere is it more evident than in its ceramics.

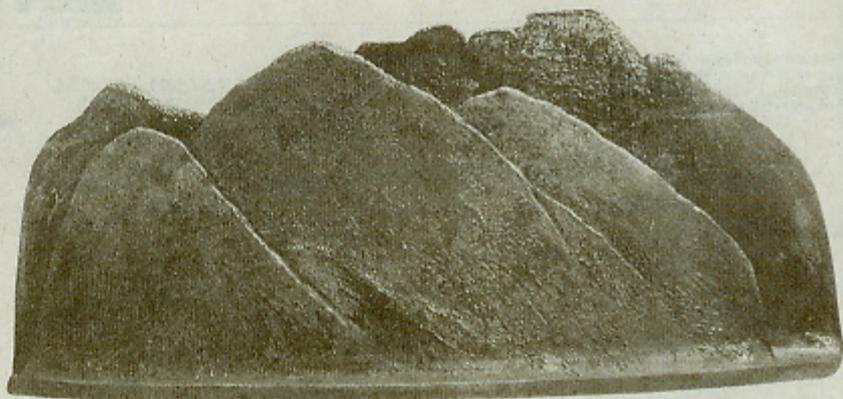
ST. PETERSBURG

Korea has a rich history in the medium, going back 5,000 years. Its artisans influenced generations of their Chinese and Japanese counterparts who borrowed techniques, adapted them and eventually overshadowed the originators.

Contemporary ceramic artists are mining ancestral skills and finding new vocabularies for them. Most of the artists here are young, products of a university system that only established ceramics as a separate area of study in the 1970s.

As in any large survey, some of the art is better than others. The size of "From the Fire," which spreads through three galleries, can be overwhelming. So I suggest this tack: Read the overview wall texts; they provide good historical background and brief explanations of materials. (A glossary of techniques would have been helpful. Unless you are a ceramicist, you might not know the difference between slips and glazes or how inlays are made.) Stroll around the galleries for a quick take on the variety. Pick out a few pieces that catch your eye and study them. Circle back and take in the others at your

Please see **CERAMICS 5E**



Hyang Lim Han, *Autumn Mountain*, 1998, stoneware clay body and fire clay.

Ceramics from 8E

own pace.

Here are some of my favorites.

Shin Kwon's magnificent *Nest* greets you at the entrance to the exhibition and its placement in prime real estate is no surprise. The vase-like vessel is made from layers of paper-thin clay sheets, fired in modulating shades of toast, from pale beige to burnt char. It's a tour de force of clay, taken to the limits of fragility. A companion piece, also titled *Nest*, is in a later gallery and the effects of travel are clear in the cracks of some of those fine clay sheets.

The porcelains, scattered throughout, use the fine white clay to good effect. Sung Min An's white orb, smooth and matte-finished, and Yik Yung Kim's bowl, glazed and subtly faceted, are examples of the dictum that elegance is refusal.

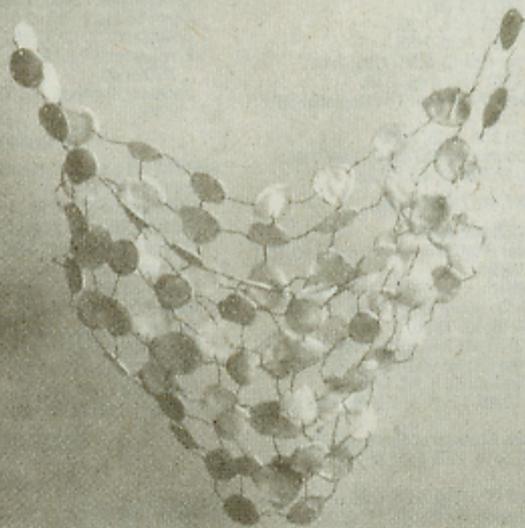
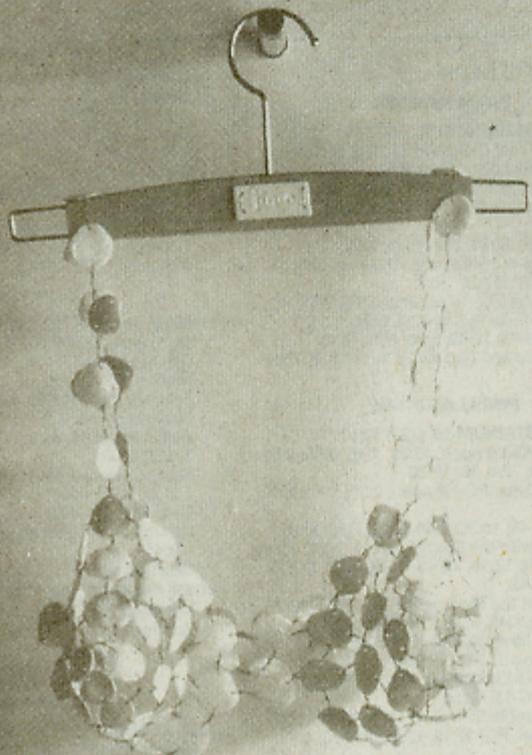
Celadon, too, is in abundance, different from Chinese celadon in its grayer colorations. Soo Jeong Kim shapes slabs into large leafy forms that wave and bend as if floating in water. Jong Koo Hwang, one of the oldest artists represented and the only one now

deceased, inlays a bottle with darker clay slips and gives its classical shape clean, contemporary lines.

The conceptual work is the most challenging and sometimes the least satisfying, as if the artists are trying to make up for lost time, experimenting and evolving.

At least that's how I see *Netting Clay II*, Jin Kyoung Kim's lingerie set made of porcelain discs and wire that is not especially original. Nor is Young Shick Kwon's *Still Life with Lemon*, though I liked its references to early 20th century western art. Folding and draping stoneware like deflated tires is innovative on Chun Hak Oh's part, but the insects he attaches are too literal and the backs of the sculptures look unfinished. Hyang Lim Han's three-dimensional landscape, *Autumn Mountain*, is wonderfully strong, spare and richly glazed, suggesting the changing colors of the countryside.

In such a large show, there is much more good than not and the abundance provides a sense of the sweep of the new movement in Korean ceramic. Best to leave the final say to time, editor that always gets the last word. Lennie Bennett can be reached at (727) 893-8293 or lennie@sptimes.com.



Jin Kyoung Kim, *Netting Clay II*, 1997, porcelain clay.