



# CERAMICS IRELAND

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# TRADITION TRANSFORMED

## CONTEMPORARY KOREAN CERAMICS, ORMEAU BATHS, BELFAST

PAULINE ROBERTS

I first saw this exhibition briefly on a trip to Belfast in January, and was so impressed that I decided to invite students from my pottery class to accompany me on a day trip to Belfast on February 13th. Ciara Hickey, the education assistant of the gallery, was most helpful in facilitating our visit and in giving us a short talk on some of the aspects and intentions behind the exhibition. *Tradition Transformed* is a touring exhibition under the auspices of the International Arts and Artists of Washington, DC and is generously supported by the Korean Foundation in Seoul. The European tour starts at the Ormeau Baths, and will continue to Spain, Germany and several other countries until 2009. I think that Belfast was very fortunate in having the opportunity to host this exhibition at the start of its tour.

*Tradition Transformed* is curated by Ms. Cho, Chung Hyun, Professor Emeritus of the College of Art, Ewha Woman's University. The assistant curator is Cho, Hyeyoung, lecturer at the same university who also coordinated the exhibition and acted as translator. The exhibition consists of 87 ceramic pieces by 29 Korean Artists, many of whom created works especially for this exhibition. The intention was to bring to European audiences some of the elegance and originality of Korean Art and to showcase some of Korea's rich cultural heritage. As the title of the exhibition suggests, the artists wished to use traditional techniques in new and exciting ways. The ceramics incorporate a fusion of these techniques with innovative shapes and forms.

It is important to state that the exhibition places a strong emphasis on the underlying philosophical ideas in Korean culture, and the strong influence such ideas have on the ceramic art is approached in a deeply spiritual society. I would like to quote Professor Cho, Chung Hyun herself

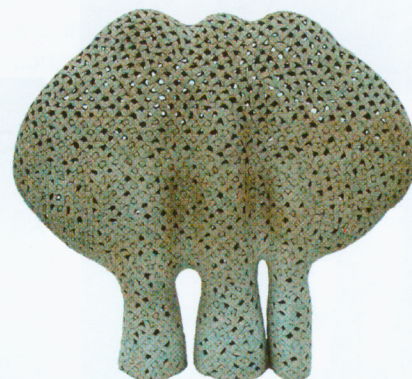
"In the east, there is a notion of immersing the self into clay. The self has to become part of nature in order to give birth to forms that are completely natural. When an artist breathes as one with the material and reaches a point of complete absorption, he or she enters a state of *SAMMAEGYEONG* - the Buddhist belief in immersing the self into an activity. The creative phenomenon in clay is not achieved by conscious calculations; rather it is the conclusion resulting from the level of immersion, comparable to a mother giving birth to a child when the time is reached. Thus, while the west encourages the creation of ceramic art resulting from planned and calculated intentions, the east upholds the result achieved by entering into the world of complete absorption where the self or ego ceases to exist".

"To the Clay work"! (this is the preferred term of Korean ceramic artists). The scale of the ceramic pieces in the exhibition is huge and there is a quiet startling exposition of many different approaches and techniques. The effect is mind blowing and one turns with amazement from piece to piece thinking, as potters do, how beautiful / amazing this is and how is it made?

There is a strong sculptural emphasis to the show and individual pieces range in height from 10cm to 127cm. I was struck by how many of the artists had achieved very successful glaze affects, emulating rock surfaces and formations. This may partly be inspired by the fact that



Ryu, Nam Hee



Guac, Roh Hoon



Lee, Myung Soon



Han, Gil Hong



70% of the Korean landscape consists of mountain ranges. The most obvious of these artists is Han, Hyang Lim, who draws direct inspiration from the landscape of her native land and shows three beautiful - and quite strikingly accurate - mountain forms. But many other artists also achieve convincing stone - like surfaces, in more abstract way for example: Ryu, Nam Hee makes extraordinary pieces entitled 'Life Delight' in which pale green limestone - effect surfaces contrast with the sensual curved forms.

Lim, Moo Keun's form's consist of huge bases of 'clay granite' containing shiny pebble forms (these works very deliberately interpret Christian symbolism, in which there is apparently a growth of interest in Korea). While Kin, Jong Hyun's work symbolises the human body, his use of black glaze conveyed to me powerful monolithic rock forms. He states that "Symmetry in the form signifies the tranquil state of the human mind" and Han Gil Hong's 'transmigration work', similarly conveys a powerful stone like quality".

Other artists choose to reflect some of Korea's plant and animal life. Park, Nae Heon uses traditional 'buncheong' techniques to portray landscapes with rivers, birds and fishes, on classical Korean vessels based on traditional storage jars. These reflect his own love of harmony and tranquillity. Park, Kyoung, Soon transfers scraffito and buncheong techniques on to amazing, asymmetrical, bird and flower decorated forms. Hong, Soon Jung starts with press moulded leaf and petal motifs but then uses them to create natural shape of amazing originality. Her piece entitled 'From the leaves' was deservedly chosen for the OB Gallery programme. Other Artists seem intoxicated by pure form to wonderful effect. Oh, Chun Hak 'the only deceased artist in the exhibition, and a highly revered one' has produced glorious, large, sensuous, pure white, curvaceous shapes. Lee, Myung Soon: check out his fantastical 'angels'. Lee, Eun Mee seems fascinated by the assembly of numerous individual clay units into geometrical formations. Both 'Holding the moment' and 'Kaleidoscope' impress, and the use of mirrors on the surfaces is intended to 'allow the spectators reflection to become part of the work'. Choi, Suk Jin whose beautiful rhythmic pieces, particularly 'Trace 1' and 'Trace 2' are inspired by dancers and their sinuous movements.

There is not enough space to mention all the artists in this marvellous exhibition but, in conclusion, I would like to include two personal favourites: Guac, Roh Hoon, whose simply named 'Series' have to be seen to be appreciated. Series 1 depicts a collection of trees which, though massive in size, allow light to penetrate through their 'netted' structure, thus producing both weight and lightness in one piece, A difficult achievement! and Kwon, Shin whose 'birds nest' forms, particularly no. 49, successfully use clay to convey lightness, texture and intricacy in a magical way. These large pieces appear delicate and fragile - a potters triumph. I have mentioned barely half of the artists - but all of those showing are challenging both the material and the form to present beautiful 'clay work' in a thought provoking and spiritual exhibition. We in the west are familiar with the deep riches of traditional Korean pottery - but this is that TRADITION truly TRANSFORMED and worth a visit.

Part of this exhibition was on show at the National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny, a review of the 1 day workshop held at the NCG with Kim, Dae Hoon visiting Korean artist will be featured in the next issue.



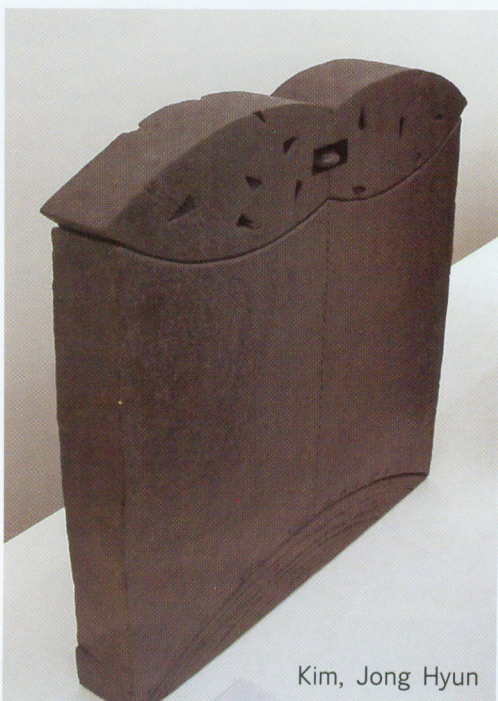
Han, Hyang Lim



Hong, Soon Jung



Kwon, Shin



Kim, Jong Hyun