

BIRTH AND EXTINCTION IN SPHERES

A circle is a shape that feels the most stable to human eyes. If lines were the first formative language used to express human emotions, a circle is the simplest yet the most complete form a line can create. For the past 20 years, SOL YOON has consistently explored circles as a running theme, incorporating various forms of spheres in his ceramic works. He produces various sized hollow spheres using a casting technique, then cuts into them to yield linear or curved sections and connects the shells piece by piece. The open sphere forms are stacked together or extended to create hyper-dimensional sculptures that inhabit the vitality and energy of autogenetic stem cells. The diameter of each sphere doesn't exceed 40 centimeters—just the right size for the artist to wrap his arms around and wield his techniques. Scoring, cutting, attaching, and sanding dozens of sphere sections with a titanium knife in hand, the artist looks almost like a doctor holding a scalpel. With preliminary plans drawn out meticulously using computers, his works are like complicated surgeries that allow no room for mistake.



The pure white objects with dramatic organic curves created through repeated birth and extinction of countless spheres are new forms of organisms birthed by YOON. "My works all begin and end with spheres, whether it's a sculptural object or tableware." Like he says, his eclectic series of ceramic works are imperatively developed and contextualized within the circular frame. For the artist, who earned his doctorate in craft from Seoul National University in 2012, the past year has been memorable in many ways. His collaboration with Amorepacific, a cosmetic company showing special interest in the field of craft through continued support, served as an opportunity to make his major work *Variation* known to public. His works shown at the *Contemporary Korean Ceramics* exhibition (2017) held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London were praised as contemporary works worth preserving for the future and became part of the museum's permanent collection. Although pure white porcelain is known to be traditionally Eastern, YOON's works are more popular in the West thanks to the contemporary qualities in his work method and the messages the pieces carry. In European countries particularly well versed in ceramics, his works are viewed as architectural objects derived from dismantlement and re-dimensionalization of the "symbol of life and perfection."



A Meaningful Sphere series,
27X27X30cm, 2011



Variation 200702, 25X25X26cm,
2007

Here's the big question: Why did you choose to work with circular forms?

Because a circle is a general and universal form. At a microscopic level, the form signifies "cells" or "a mother's womb," and at a cosmological level, the form encompasses stories of all entities in this world including all planets. A physicist would say that the circular form of planets is due to gravity, but as an artist, I want to approach it from a different angle. I don't think recognition of a circle should be so complicated—I use ceramics to explore the shared intuitive notion and feeling of the form. Any form can be interpreted in many ways according to individual memories and experiences, but isn't it ironic that every form started out as a simple sphere in the beginning? I think I'm attracted to the process of making something out of the simplest form, turning it into something meaningful.

You mentioned that you have personal memories and experiences related to spheres.

Round forms are subjects of my exploration and admiration, but they embody antagonistic aspects as well. When I was a child, a bright-colored, bouncy-looking balloon once popped right in front of my face with a loud noise. I was extremely startled—the subject of my childish happiness had instantly vanished from my sight, and ever since, I've been traumatized by round forms and came to associate them with the sense of loss I felt at the time. So for me, a sphere represents multiple internal aspects that indwell somebody. Through my works, I want to prove that breaking isn't necessarily the end of something, but rather, a new beginning. Just like my childhood memory, in a sense, I believe that everything constantly undergoes a process of self-conquest and development. Internally, the reason for my obsession with round forms could be in order to compensate for the sense of loss I felt as a child.

As for the color, why did you choose white porcelain?

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of *The Little Prince*, once said that "Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away." To me, the color white feels that way. White creates the most dramatic sense of volume when photographed with lighting. I want my messages to be fully delivered through the spherical forms, so I chose white, the color that won't get in the way of the viewer's appreciation of the form, the most minimal color removed of additives—like a white canvas.



Your works show exquisite technique even at a glance—one can almost picture the poised breathing of a ceramist. What are the processes you go through to produce one of these pieces?

First, I slip cast different forms of spheres. Then I cut and refine the sections of each sphere while the clay is still moist because if the walls are too thin to begin with, they can't survive the kiln. Ninety percent of the work is done during the drying stage. Then I bisque them at about 900°C and sand them under water. This process smooths out more than 90 percent of the fine scratches. Only after I fire the spheres again at 1260°C do they become ceramic. At this point, they're as hard as rocks and difficult to mend.

Your works have such abstained aesthetics that they make you imagine what kind of space they would be displayed in.

One of the overseas collectors who owns one of my "Archetype" series wanted to put the work on top of a grand piano so that the work would be reflected on the glossy surface of the piano. One French collector e-mailed me to tell me that his "collection is finally complete," saying that he'd always wanted an "open sphere work" to compliment his "closed sphere" ceramic sculpture made by Danish artist Steen Ipsen, and that my work was a perfect match.



Your final works are categorized into six different series. Could you explain a little bit about each series?

All of my works originate from spheres, but each series differs in theme, and there are six series at the moment. The "Variation" series explores the process in which slip-casted units are tailored and attached together to create new forms. This series began when I first cut open a sphere, and at the time, a lot of people told me that the works looked like tumors or cancer cells. I experimented more with the form itself rather than its aesthetics. I wanted the works to resemble a tenaciously thriving life, so I began attaching small spheres together, which is why I think people associated them with cancer cells. The "Infinity" series can be described by two keywords: extension and cohesion. These works look like rosebuds seen from above. The "From the Archetype" series consists of fragments of spheres reassembled to function as individual ceramic works. This series branches out to "From the Archetype_B" and "From the Archetype_C." B stands for "border," and the series introduces works in between boundaries. Plates that can be seen as sculptures, for example—works that change their purpose according to the user. C stands for "curve," and this series is comprised of smaller pieces with accentuated curves—brooches or small-size tableware, which I'm looking to develop later into a series of relief works. The "Leaf Container" series is a collection of tableware. I'm trying to come up with many more and different series.



From the Archetype_B line_edge set, 55X19X14cm, 2014, This artwork has been taken by one of collectors at SOFA 2014



Variation 200901, 26X27X21cm,
2009



Variation of Space series 201601,
47X50X38cm, 2016, collected in
V&A museum, London

I heard that your works were highly evaluated at last year's Philadelphia Craft Show.

For the show, I selected works with the strongest impact as sculptural objects: the "Infinity" and "Archetype" series, and nine pieces of tableware from the "Luna" series. My goal was in introducing the formative beauty of my works. Among the works, the "Infinity" series and the "Lunar" series sold well. My works were also featured in the craft show brochure.

With increased popularity of craft, as testified by events like the Loewe Craft Prize, more and more brands are collaborating with craftsmen. Last year, you also collaborated with Amorepacific, famous host of the Sulwha Cultural Exhibition.

It was a valuable experience in that I was able to introduce my work through a different channel, but I still hope the artwork and the products would stand as equals instead of the artworks serving to flatter the products. If given the chance, I'd like to collaborate on projects related to sound. Spheres, the main motif of my works, symbolize containment or a vessel, and in that sense, I think they would work nicely with speakers, which exude sound.

Where do you get ideas and inspiration when you're stuck?

I'm deeply interested in planets and the universe, so I enjoy books and documentaries on them. German astronomer Johannes Kepler's Third Law states that "The square of the orbital period of a planet is directly proportional to the cube of the semi-major axis of its orbit." This is just a mathematical formula, but it applies to every single planet. It's amazing to think that there's a worldly logic spoken in terms of spheres and diameters that applies to all of us. There's a theory that suggests that the only reason mammals, humans in particular, could survive until now is because of a giant asteroid that fell on the Earth 65 million years ago. All the dinosaurs died out as a result, but relatively small mammals that hid underground eventually evolved into humans. The important part of this story, for me, is that "everything was crushed." It's about destruction begetting new life, which is in line with the dualities of life that I talk about through my spherical works. I turn to these stories to find clues and frameworks for my works.



SOL YOON | CERAMIC ARTIST

SOL YOON is known for expansive works created through assembly and disassembly of sphere parts. He entered Seoul National University as a craft major in 1995 and graduated from the doctorate program of the same school in 2012. During his 10 years in school, he studied ceramics, through which he was introduced to the sphere form. He currently produces six series of works dedicated to spherical characteristics. YOON has held three solo exhibitions including *REFINE* held at the KCDF Gallery in 2015, and has held numerous exhibitions overseas, showcasing his authentic style. He also partook in approximately 50 domestic and international group shows including the Philadelphia Craft Show (2017), the *Contemporary Korean Ceramics* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum (2017), *Céramique Contemporaine Cordéenne* hosted by Fondation d'entreprise Bernardaud in France (2016), and the SOFA Chicago (2014). In 2017, he gained public recognition as "the sphere artist" through a commercial collaboration project for Amorepacific's Sulwhasoo products. With the Gold Prize he won at the 2005 Swarovski Small Objet Festival as a stepping stone, YOON has won a series of prestigious prizes for craft at the Cheongju Craft Biennale, Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale, and Contemporary Ceramic Arts Award of Korea. His works are owned by the Victoria and Albert Museum, Amorepacific, Kwai Fung Hin Art Gallery in Hong Kong, Swarovski, Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, and more.