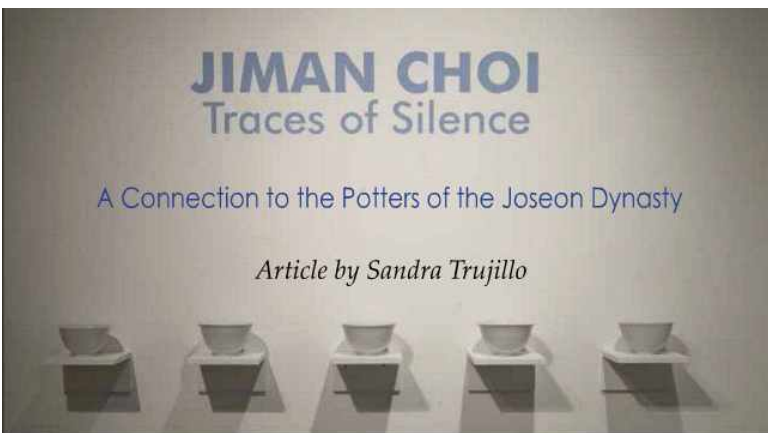


JIMAN CHOI

Traces of Silence

A Connection to the Potters of the Joseon Dynasty

Article by Sandra Trujillo



WHEN JIMAN CHOI TOLD ME THAT HE PLANNED TO reproduce a Joseon dynasty (14th–19th centuries) period bowl for a solo exhibition, I was curious about the form his exhibit would take. For Choi, the Joseon dynasty represents commitment to an idea and the embodiment of artistic ideals about ritual and beauty. Choi encountered two sublime Joseon bowls at the Gyeonggi Museum in Korea in 2003. He was impressed by several aspects of the bowls: the symbolic names given to the pots (which imply a greater meaning or ritual symbolism) their simplicity and the history connected to them. Simultaneously, they also represent the herculean effort required to realise an ideal into form. These two Joseon bowls had a profound effect on Choi's ideas and direction for his project.

The Joseon potters of Korea emulated some aspects of Chinese imperial porcelain from the Ming dynasty. If you go to a museum with a collection of Asian art, seek out *Ch'eng-hua* (Ming) Chinese bowls or examples from Korean Goryeo and Choson dynasty, such as the 'moon jar' that is both soft and pure white. When you see these objects you can understand what inspired Choi. It is there that you get a sense of the Chinese and Korean potters as they worked for imperial courts and imperial tastes. You get a sense of their innovation with materials, form and firing techniques. You see an entire lexicon of perfected glazes and contours and begin to understand Choi's motivation to learn about the period and the makers.

Choi's exhibit, *Traces of Silence*, is a result of his exploration and practice of emulating two Joseon bowls. For Choi the bowl is a symbol that carries personal meaning that connects the past to his

experience as an artist. The two referenced Korean Joseon bowls each bear a Chinese inscription: 天 地 地 土 (Heaven, Earth, Earth, Earth) and 地 土 (Earth, Earth). To Choi, these characters add symbolic meaning to each form. Similar characters also connect the ancient myth *Dan-gun* of the creation of Korean peoples (*Hwan-in* sky deity, *Hwan-won* earth deity) and the first ancestor (*Dan-gun*) of the Korean people. In Choi's recent exhibition at the Lamar Dodd School of Art, in Athens, Georgia, US (October 2014) he explores this singular form in an attempt to uncover the meaning, knowledge and feelings inspired by the original object.

In Choi's exhibition, the gallery walls are lined with 200 bowls arranged in three rows on evenly spaced shelves. The porcelain bowls are glazed and appear to be ice blue. The bowls have neatly balanced proportions with deep and open wells with a simple articulated ring within each interior. They are wider than they are tall and have steeply rounded sides pushing upward and slightly outward rising to flared rims. The subtle bluish colours and contours are illuminated with the perfect amounts of light, which describe tiny variations. The installation frames the space and surrounds the viewer. Choi's exhibit seems to straddle the line between factory made production porcelain and sculptural installation. At the same time, the work conveys a feeling of monotony because of the effect of multiples and the reliance upon the pattern of a grid as an organisational system. The grouping is reminiscent of the 'stacks' within a library or expansive archive within a ceramics museum.

Choi's research of the Joseon potters and his studies of Korean ceramics in general, function as the subtexts of the exhibition. His stories about the

commitment of the Joseon potters to obtain white porcelain are akin to the legends about Johann Böttger (17th century German alchemist). Both spent endless hours testing materials to understand the complexity of porcelain production. In both cases there was a clash between desired and available materials – there was also something impressive about the tonnage and time it took to realise his idea.

In Choi's installation he not only follows the practice of the Joseon potters, but relies upon a traditional method of learning. Here, there is some resonance with Xie He's *Six Principles of Painting* and the sixth rule – learn the form by following in the path of your predecessors. In this line, all of Choi's forms are grounded deeply within the cultural tradition and history of Korean pottery.

Like other ceramics artists using multiples within an installation, such as Edmund de Waal's *Signs and Wonders* at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Choi also focuses on the visual effect of the elements of design within a linear structure. Here, Choi focuses less on the content and meaning between the forms, but primarily on the regularity and economy of space. He presented his objects as an archive about the process of making rather than the relationships between and among the forms. He used the grid to mark and measure his time and to document his exercise. The power of Choi's exhibit is that it shows every studied attempt at the potter's wheel in order to realise the Joseon bowl.

Over the years, Jiman Choi has used alternative practices involving the denial of sight to allow for new experiences. The focus of his former experiments was to create unexpected outcomes. His recent exhibition opposes his past work and is singular in

Facing page: *Exhibition View (Traces of Silence)* 2014. Wheel thrown porcelain on wooden shelves. 21 x 12 x 12 cm/ea.
Left: *Installation View*.
Top right: *Bowl (No. 124)* 2014. Wheel thrown porcelain. 124th bowl among 200.
Above: *Bowl Interior*.
Below: *Jiman Choi*.

content. By limiting his new work to an idealised form, this exhibition impressed the viewer with multiples. The surprise was the disinterest in his former practice. There was not a point of departure from the historical reference, but a reverence for it. His choice of the title, *Traces of Silence*, reflects his deep commitment to both idea and ideal as a meditative act. The presentation of this experience became a visual marker that had power and presence, which also cemented his identity to his Korean culture and fascination with the potters of the period.



Sandra Trujillo is a ceramics artist and Associate Professor of Art at Georgia College. She currently lives and works in Milledgeville, Georgia.