

Minkyu Lee

HIDDEN STRUCTURE REVEALED

by David Damkoehler

Minkyu Lee was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1976. He completed rigorous undergraduate and graduate study at Seoul National University. Within the context of 5000 years of Korean ceramic history, his early body of work was, in many ways, a continuation of Josun Dynasty porcelain ware, its forms and glazes. While Lee respects the tradition, he introduces to that tradition new, original ideas and forms.

His early cast work is a series of vessel forms that appear to be perfectly assembled from hundreds of small white-glazed cubes. The first explanation that comes to mind is that they have been painstakingly assembled because they cannot be cast in one piece. Lee explains that this is the start of an idea that continues in his current work where he represents a hidden structure, a dialog between the inside and outside of the vessel, a world made of hidden cubes. The Great Wall of China, the Egyptian Pyramids, and fractal geometry inspired the selection of the cube as an essential structural element.

The forms are achieved by assembling slip-cast segments with great precision. The last piece he created in South Korea in 2006, *Hidden Structure Revealed #11* (page 46), is a cylinder made of cast

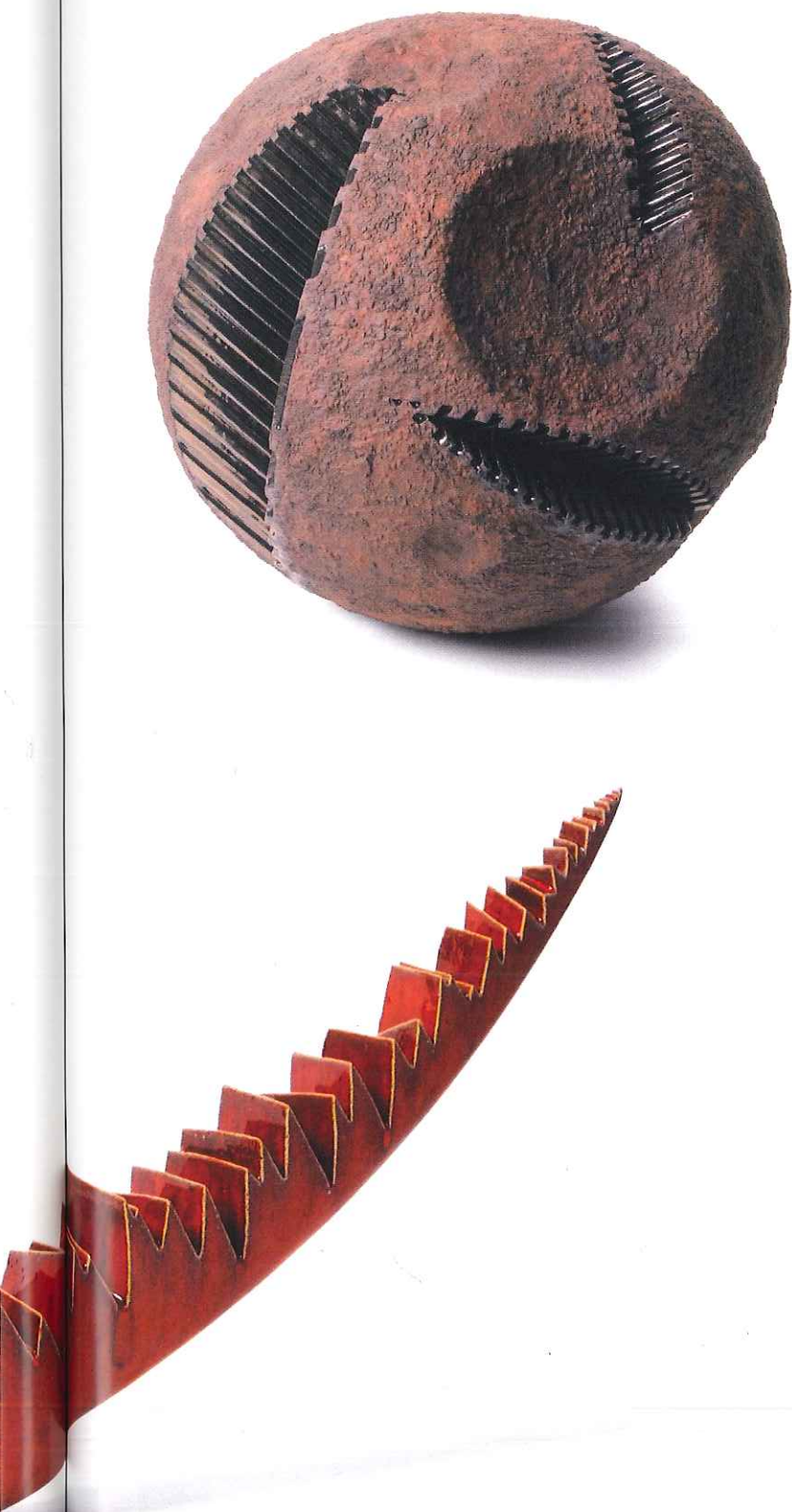
horizontal slices or sections that are joined together when leather hard and fired to cone 8. This is a highly difficult operation as the percentage of moisture in each section must be similar in order to maintain perfect symmetry when it is stacked. The results are spectacular, with the perfect cubes arranged in a positive and negative checkerboard with very deep relief. The exterior is a precise cylinder with each layer showing through a white glaze as a row of paper-thin lines. The delicate, translucent exterior terminates in a wide solid ring, which frames the interior of stacked cubes. The effect is mesmerizing and magical.

These hidden structures recall a poem by Lao-tse's, quoted in Johannes Itten's *Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus*, (Wiley, 1975):

*"Thirty spokes meet at the hub,
But the void within them creates the essence of the wheel.
Clay forms pots,
But the void within creates the essence of the pot.
Walls with windows and doors make the house,
But the void within them creates the essence of the house.
Fundamentally:
The material contains utility,
The immaterial contains essence."*



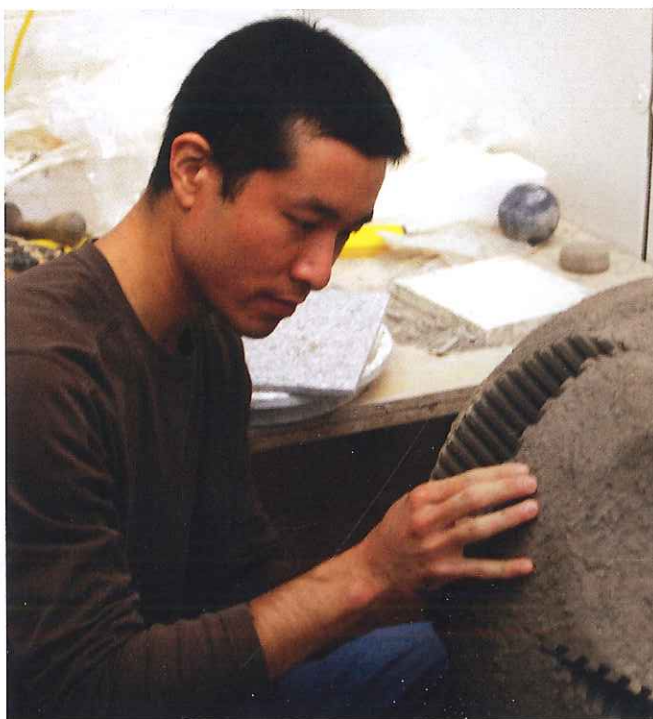
Right: *Crescent #6*, 3 ft. 5½ in. (1.05 m) in length, stoneware, glazed and fired to cone 3.
Opposite: *Meteorite*, 18 in. (46 cm) in diameter, stoneware, fired to cone 3.



If the void within is the essence of the pot, it helps explain the striking interior space of Lee's vessels.

When he enrolled in the graduate program at the School for American Crafts at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) to study with Rick Hirsch in 2006, he wanted to explore new concepts and use a wide range of techniques, a direction broader in scope than the more specific study and technique that encompassed his graduate experience in Korea. Lee used an expanded color palette and combined handbuilding, wheel throwing, carving, and slip casting to produce asymmetrical vessel forms and stacked cube interior spaces. The cubes were assembled by hand, rather than slip casting. This led to a series of explorations using an expanded range of metaphors, like landscapes, meteorites, and the crescent moon. The exteriors of these vessels ranged from highly finished surfaces with metallic glazes to very rough meteorite-like surfaces. Usually these forms show great contrast between the exterior and the interior of a piece.

While he was an artist-in-residence at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in 2007, he was profoundly affected by the mountainous landscape of Montana, especially the volcanic environment of Yellowstone Park. The hot springs and craters revealing the interior of the earth inspired and reinforced Lee's aesthetic path of contrasts of light and dark spaces, rough and smooth textures, corroded surfaces and crystalline serrated shapes. Lee's 2007 piece *Meteorite* is a spheroid shape with a red-orange





surface with carved wedges of varying scale and depth. The interiors of the wedges have a glossy finish on immaculately carved serrated forms. Another example of this work, from 2008, *Crescent #2-1*, slip cast in stoneware, has an exterior that is approximately round with large serrations surrounding the outside edge. A complex system of elongated triangles join large outside facets with an inner saw-toothed edge resulting in an ovoid negative space with the points of the crescent withholding as much as they reveal. It exploits the thin slice of the waxing and waning moon, where we only see the lighted edge that means the rest of the moon is also present in darkness and silence.

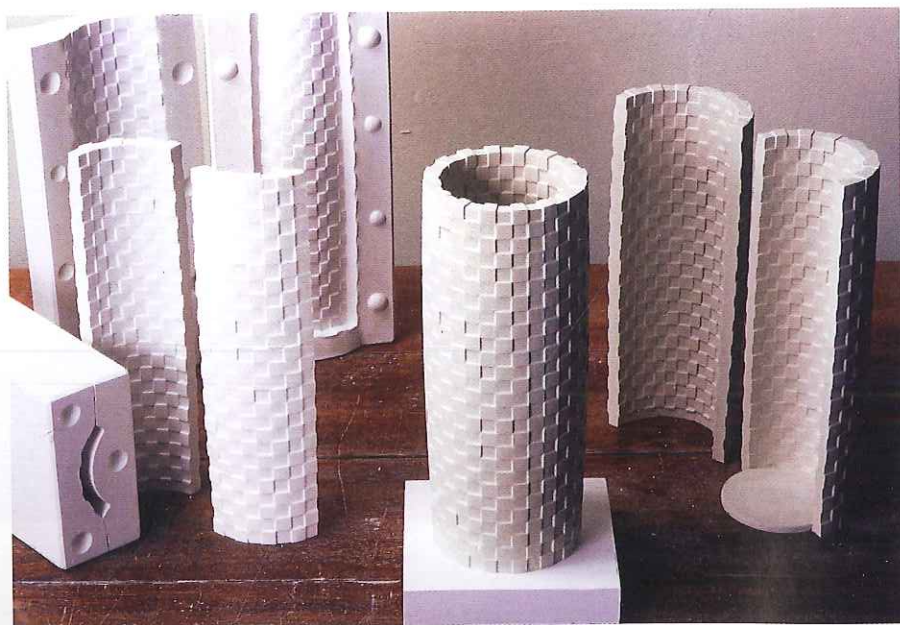
The edge and the border between the outside and the inside are important to Lee. This is where the structure is revealed. The effect is reinforced by the two pointed ends of the crescent, leading our eye up and around, completing its shape in our mind. The surfaces are suggestive of minerals and geodes, but are not found in nature. They resist explanation and didactic meaning, but they have a quality of the hyper-real, a concept defined by Jean Baudrillard as, "the simulation of something which never really existed." Lee's work questions our relationship to this metaphoric edge, where we peek in and glimpse the uncanny and unknowable.

Lee's work is fastidiously and laboriously crafted. He makes about one piece a month, ten or fifteen pieces a year, each one requiring its own set of up to 100 different test tiles in order to find the two "right" glazes.

During a studio visit in March 2010, Lee was carving the surface of 200–300 pounds of leather hard clay balanced on an electric wheel. He explains that he is physically reversing his enigmatic crescent forms by making the negative space be positive. He calls it a *pre-crescent*, giving a poetic context to the formulation of his crescent-based artwork. The new pre-crescent form will still have

Above: *Hidden Structure Revealed #11*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain with clear glaze, fired to cone 8.

Right: Molds were made of wall sections for pieces in the "Hidden Structure" series. When assembled, the grid lines conceal the seams and the impression is of one monolithic cast.





Left: *Crescent #2-1*, 18½ in. (47 cm) in diameter, slip-cast stoneware with glaze, fired to cone 6.

Below: *Crescent #7*, 44 in. (1.1 m) in height, stoneware with glaze, fired to cone 3, with acrylic paint.

his signature geometric crystalline edge, but it is now inverted. He further explained that in continuing his experience with massive installations, his new work would have a visual context between the pieces and the space around the pieces.

Lee's continues to apply his background in meticulous technique and Korean ceramic tradition to new insights and new ceramic perspectives in America. His inspiration from the American landscape and his rigorous technical innovation have resulted in singular works that combine elements of his native and adopted cultures. Sometimes they seem like opposites, and sometimes they are two parts of one whole, like the interior and exterior of his work—where the structure is revealed.

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