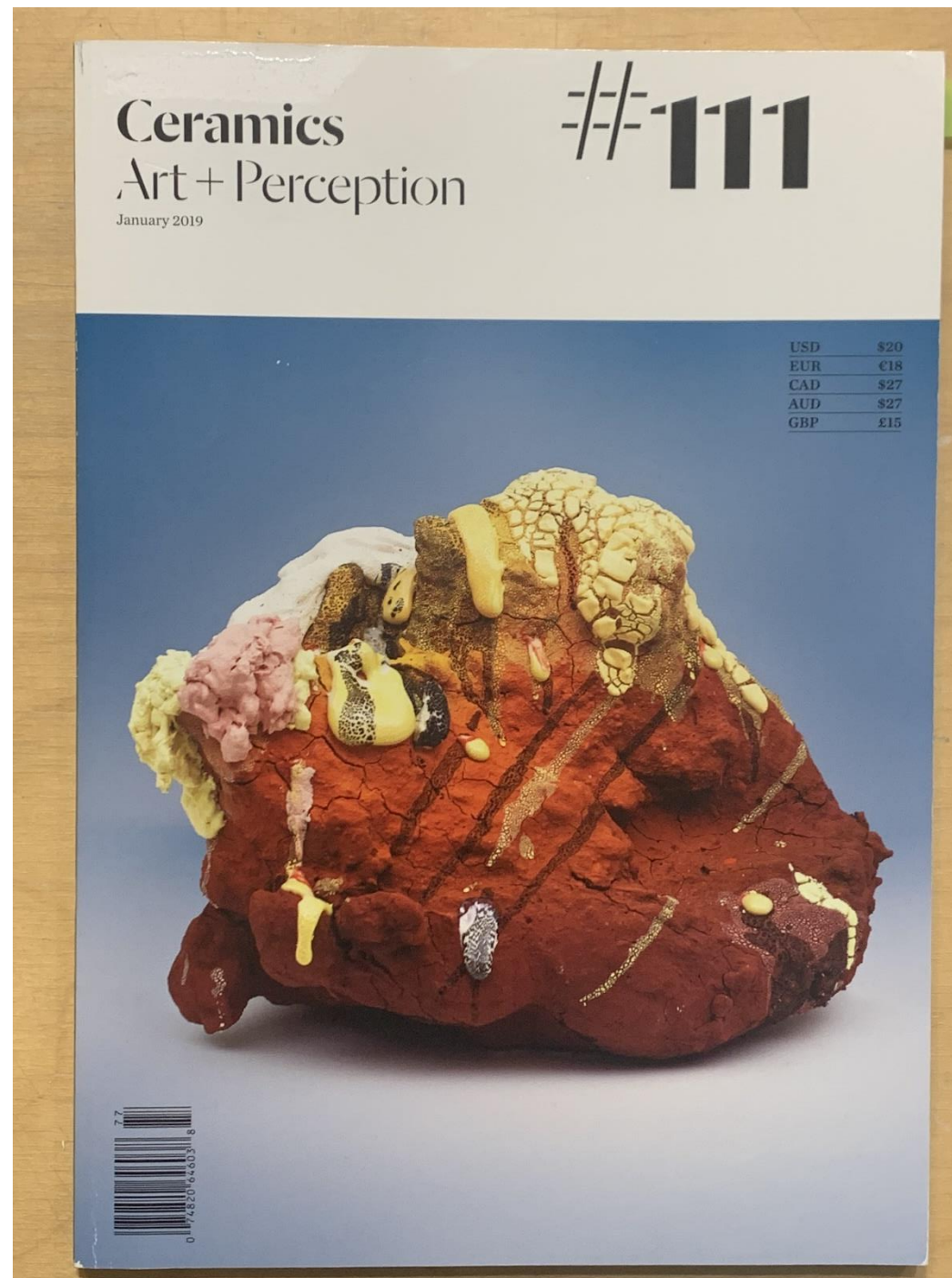


Wookjae Maeng

Reviews, Article

Ceramics Art+Perception

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The Social Role of Ecological Artistic Expression

Written by Wookjae Maeng

In answer to the question, "For what purpose is art created?", makers respond with various reasons. Of the myriad of potential purposes, the aspect which I focus on is social change effected by works of art. By inciting interest in contemporary social or environmental problems manifest within our society, I seek to produce work that enlightens and generates positive change in the viewer. Such socially-conscious works have the possibility to engender these changed feelings without being based on scientific or political methods. In summary, the work I make imbues change that has a fundamental and curative effect, instead of being change that is extemporaneous or superficial.

My work speaks for the organisms within ecosystems damaged by environmental change and anthropocentric thoughts, and it expresses the different relationships needed for their co-habitation.

Broadly speaking, public interest in the environment began in the 1960s. This led to further research in the areas of science, philosophy, and politics; art too began to take on a role by expressing, and showing an interest in balancing, the relationship between life and the environment. In parallel with the 1960s cultural trend of skepticism toward detached modernism, awareness of art as a part of nature and the environment began to take hold. This concept utilizes nature's transformative processes as a form of artistic expression and

uses materials from nature, leading to the emergence of 'nature-art', which demands awareness of environmental problems.

I participated in a residency program in the US and Canada in 2003¹. During this period, I lived in an isolated rural area, totally unlike the noisy and complicated urban environment I was accustomed to. This allowed for interaction with wild animals (such as deer and mountain goats) and sparked my interest in the wonderment of life, equality of existence, and changes in relationships. My thoughts, during these experiences, formed the starting point for my research into artistic expression based on ecological discourse. Here are some of the most formative experiences I encountered during my time at both the American and Canadian residential institutions.

The first took place on a small, quiet road in Helena, in the American state of Montana while I was travelling with a fellow artist. A deer blocked the road in front of us, forcing us to stop our car. In general, deer in this region tend to distance themselves from people and maintain their guard at all times. We regarded this deer, which did not run despite our proximity, with perplexity. It looked alternately at us and at the side of the road, and where the deer's eyes lingered, we spotted the carcass of a young deer. Perhaps it had died after getting hit by a car? The exchange of looks I experienced with the deer in the road was sad enough to leave a lasting and vivid memory.

Imperceptible mice.
2015, porcelain, wooden
pallet, slip casting, each
mouse is 2.7 x 6 x 3.5
in (7 x 15 x 9 cm).
Image credit:
Wookjae Maeng.



Adaptation #02 - Nuala, 2012, porcelain, wood, slip casting, 12 x 11 x 30 in (30.5 x 28 x 76 cm).
Image credit: Myoungseok Huh.

However, reality is a space that forces obedience; it is nothing more than a space created through forced reconciliation and harmony.

My second experience also involved a deer killed in a car accident. While on my way to the dormitory I discovered the carcass of a large deer and I endured a feeling of great loss. In that moment, a group of teenagers passed by, spitting and swearing at the deer when they discovered it. Although I speculated that the group may have, in the past, experienced some sort of damage because of deer, their actions made me think about the misaligned relationship between humans and animals.

I was fortunate to experience a more interactive relationship between humans and animals in the town of Banff, in the province of Alberta, Canada. There, I was able to feel and closely observe wild animals with less fear of humans, and to experience people's consideration for the animals and their efforts to cohabitate. But I also experienced the inverse of this relationship through the hunting culture, as well as one case in which a civilian was attacked by a bear. I soon began to take an interest in expressing the harmony between humans and other forms of life. Later, as I gained more experience in – and memories of – both urban areas and nature, my interest in an ideal environment, that is in harmony with nature, came to outweigh the perceived benefits of urban life. This has consistently been my motivation in expressing the relationship between various forms of life, whether big or small.

Through art, I seek to demonstrate the importance of relationships and the difficult adaptations forced on many forms of life due to anthropocentric environmental changes and territorial expansion. My works are based on the interconnected relationships between different forms of life (including humans), the environment, and anthropocentric thoughts.

They seek to express the negative social changes currently taking place all around us from a critical perspective.

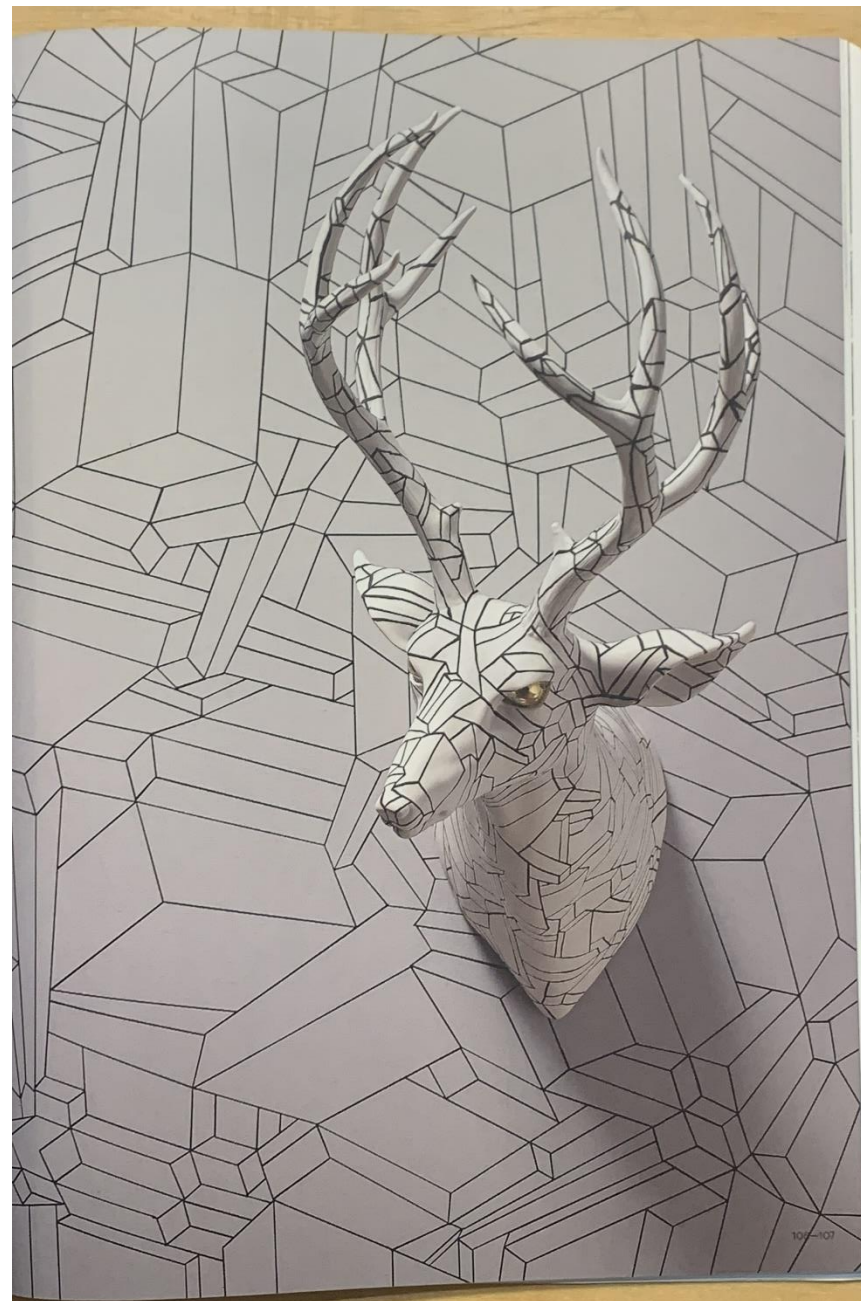
The shape of the life form chosen as the subject for my work is usually that of an animal, however – depending on the location, environment, and experience within which the artwork is created – various other forms of life, such as insects and plants, may also be used.

In works based on my experiences in Western cultures, horned animals are the creatures that most frequently appear. This conveys a dual meaning, alluding to the emergence of horns as products of hunting and taxidermy, both facets of Western culture. Ironically, because of the (meaningless) human tendency toward possessiveness and boasting, a creature's horns become a threat to its life. The adaptation and evolution of horns, a means by which the creature can protect its territory, its kin, or even itself, within the ecosystem, became instead the cause of the creature's sacrifice. This can be perceived as a phenomenon in which human greed leads to the destruction of an ecosystem's natural circular flow. As with the claim of social ecology (that undergoes transformation within the contemporary framework of hierarchy and power) the expanded greed of humans has a visible influence on other forms of life as well. To express this contradiction in relationships, as well as the selfish thoughts and actions of humans, I selected an herbivore, with horns, to be the symbol of a damaged form of life. Furthermore, the animal's shape does not include its body and legs. I have instead used only the form of its head – processed by taxidermy – as this has often been used to serve a human's need to possess and display it to other humans. This represents how animals continue to be deprived of their lives.



Left:
Grey Adaptation #03,
2012, porcelain, wood,
slip casting, 9.8 x 7.5 x
14.2 in (25 x 19 x 36 cm).
Image credit:
Wookjae Maeng.

Opposite:
Camouflage, 2012,
porcelain, wood, slip
casting, 30 x 16 x 41 in
(76 x 40 x 104 cm).
Image credit:
Myoungwook Huh



Currently, I have selected symbols easily spotted in the setting of Seoul – for example dogs, cats, snails, spiders, mice, and various plants regarded as weeds – to produce artworks to communicate with the public. By expressing the aesthetic beauty of various weeds and their tenacious hold on life, the beauty and value of spiders, moths, and other insects branded with negative stigma – as well as mice that have been long deprived by humans of the right to life – I seek to raise awareness of the existence of weak life forms. Furthermore, my works express my desire to encourage the public to take an interest in the social problem of abandoned dogs and cats, and to respect and acknowledge these animals' lives. To repeat: my intention is to foster a change of thought and progress toward an ideal mode of cohabitation, which can allow all lives to support one another in this artificial environment, rather than simply living in an

My work speaks for the organisms within ecosystems damaged by environmental change and anthropocentric thoughts, and it expresses the different relationships needed for their co-habitation.

uncomfortable proximity.

The surface of some animal-shaped objects are surrounded with stripes. These patterns symbolize the animals' adaptation to artificial spaces and the marks of violence that humans have perpetrated against nature. It also re-enacts the topic of humans, nature, and civilization by using a dual metaphor. People who dwell in urban areas may think that their situation and environment are natural. However, reality is a space that forces obedience; it is nothing more than a space created through forced reconciliation and harmony. This is perhaps true in nature as well. The nature we often speak of has already been modified, even manipulated, by civilization. Gernot Böhme, a philosopher and aesthete, stated that nature is realistically and inevitably a "socially constituted nature."² This statement, of course, cannot be misunderstood as ignoring nature's essence and importance – paradoxically, it emphasizes the importance of nature and the ecosystem.

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The eyes of various animal-shaped objects are expressed in sparkling liquid gold. The metallic aspect of the eyes represents the image of human society in the eyes of other entities – in other words, the environment formed by materialistic thought that is driven by development and progress. But the warmth of the gold also matches the white form of the animals, functioning to effect liveliness and allowing for dual interpretation.

When embedding messages within artworks, effort must be made to maintain a sufficient ambiguity that allows for multiple interpretations, rather than straightforward interpretations that force an audience to appreciate the work in a predetermined manner. To actively incite interest in social problems along with artistic appreciation, grotesque expressions are used to create somewhat uncomfortable visual stimuli. To further spark interest and to catch the public eye, the surface

is finished in a realistic and sophisticated manner, using slip-casting technique or fine-particle porcelain. For composition and presentation in the exhibition space, mixtures of various mediums are used. However, the majority of the sculptures are produced using a slip casting technique, giving precise and sharp expression with pure white results. The warmth of the surface, which is fired to high temperatures, results in levels of completeness difficult to attain with other artificial sculpture materials and also allows the audience to emotionally engage with the work.

Along with many other efforts by various social activists to encourage harmonious cohabitation of different forms of life, art has been effectively fulfilling its role, giving rise to various exhibitions that successfully communicate with the public. I hope to see more artistic attempts to transcend simple aesthetic appreciation, triggering the emergence of more works that can take on a social role in encouraging positive changes around us. ■

Relations #21.
2009, porcelain
plant, slip casting.
Image credit:
Wookjae Maeng.

Endnotes
1. Archie Bray
Foundation (USA), The
Banff Centre (Canada)
2. Gernot Böhme,
Naturlich Natur. Über
Natur im Zeitalter
ihrer technischen
Reproduzierbarkeit.
Frankfurt am Main,
1992, p. 123.

About the Author
Wookjae Maeng is a
ceramic artist from Seoul,
Korea. He received Ph.D.
in ceramic design from
Kookmin University,
Seoul, Korea, and Master's
degree in ceramic art from
Göteborg University
in Sweden and Kyunghee
University, Yongin, Korea.
(www.wookjae.com)



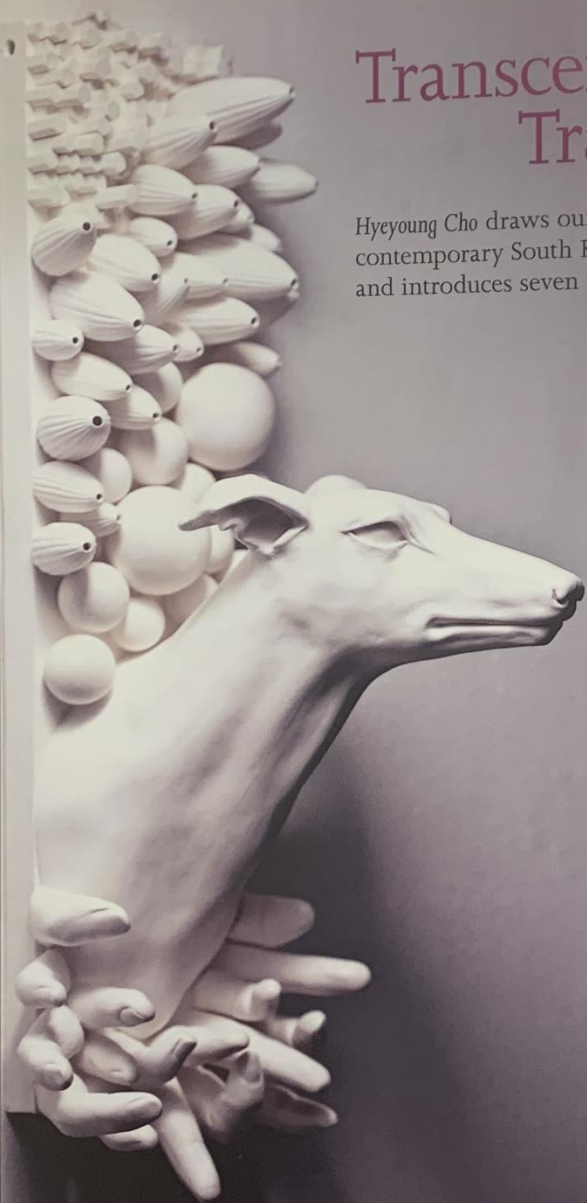
Ceramic Review

July/Aug 2014



Transcending Tradition

Hyeyoung Cho draws our attention to contemporary South Korean ceramics, and introduces seven young artists.



1 Wookjae Maeng - *Relations*-#06, slip-cast porcelain, 2009, H42cm
2 Hoeri Choi - *Paramount*, porcelain, cobalt, gold leaf, 2012, H16cm

The twenty-first century is an exciting time for the development of contemporary ceramics in Korea. Last year, working as the international commissioner for the *Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale 2013* (GICB), I have seen some positive signs. The event focused largely on providing opportunities for young artists not only in Korea, but internationally, to encourage them to advance a step further with their careers. In my opinion Korea is active in developing contemporary ceramics because there are many large events that accommodate the needs of artists. Over the past fifteen years, beginning with the *Jinro International Invitational Ceramic Art Workshop and Exhibition* many ceramics-related events have been established in Korea. Since 2000, regional governments have been active in organising arts- and culture-related venues.

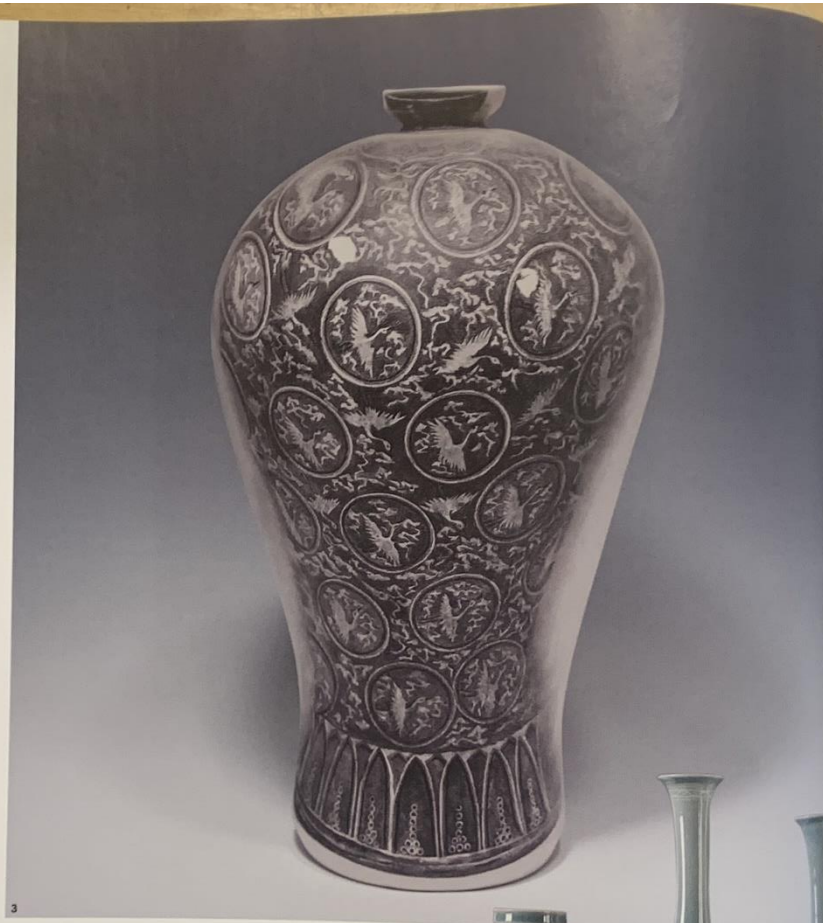
Even today Korea's ceramic heritage plays an important role in influencing and providing creative resources

Today there are numerous biennales, residency programmes, and exhibitions, and among them the GICB, *Cheongju International Craft Biennale*, and Clayarch Gimhae Museum have gained much international recognition.

For this article I have focused on artists who have participated in one or more of the above. Not all of them come from ceramics-related backgrounds but rather they are from different art disciplines such as sculpture, painting, and others. Recently this has been a predominant feature and in my opinion it is stimulating for contemporary ceramics.

Today concepts in contemporary ceramics universally focus on postmodern expressions with reference to individual and original visual languages based on an artist's personality and autonomy. Each artist has a story to tell as everyone lives in a different timeframe with different experiences. Yet many are either indirectly or directly addressing issues related to capitalist societal, material, and consumer culture; human desire and anxiety; environmental awareness; and cultural hybridism and conflicts. Based on this, the artists introduced here fall into three main themes: 'resonating the vessel form', 'society and environment', and 'urban transformation'.





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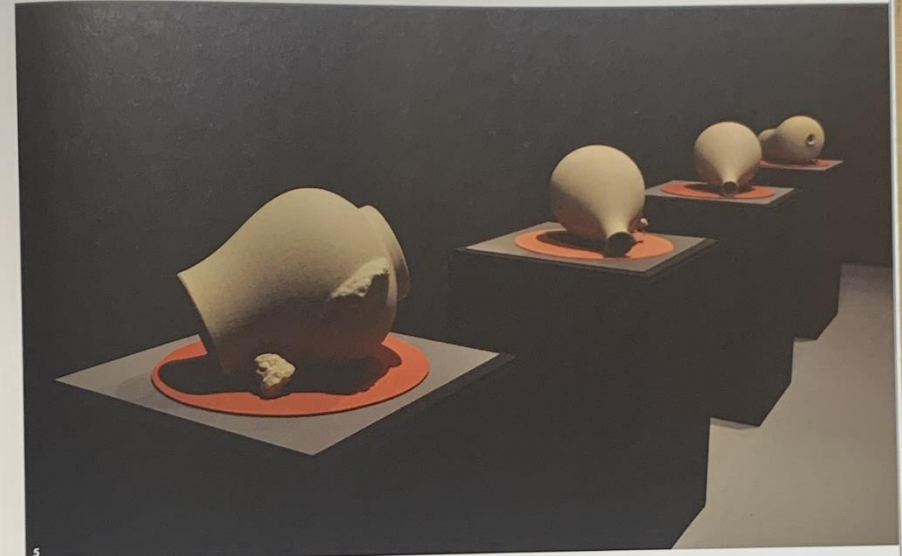
RESONATING THE VESSEL FORM In spite of Korea having a long and rich ceramic history, which is said to be more than 10,000 years old¹, its modern and contemporary development is less than a century old. Even today Korea's ceramic heritage plays an important role in influencing and providing creative resources. Many artists attempt to re-interpret celadon, buncheong, and porcelain² wares in search of innovative ideas.

Euijeong Yoo is no exception as he is inspired by twelfth-century celadon bottles – fruit-shaped bottles. Born in the 1970s and growing up in the 1990s, Yoo was exposed to the sudden infiltration of international commercial brands – Nike, Adidas, Coca Cola, and more. He integrates the importance of Korea's ceramic tradition with popular culture as a statement on the 1990s capitalism in Korea. Yoo's pieces are titled *FACTUM* based on the meaning of 'fact'. Often Yoo's works are kitsch with a twist of humour. They are



4

3 Sekyun Ju – Tracing Drawing 68, fired porcelain, pencil drawing, 2012, H44.5cm
4 Euijeong Yoo – *FACTUM* Series, celadon clay body, inlaid, slip-cast in PET bottles, 2013, H40cm max. 5 Haesook Jung – Untitled, white stoneware, 2012, H40cm



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Ceramics is an important field in Korea, one that represents its history and culture.

a mix and match of different elements, such as neon signs and Buddha's head.

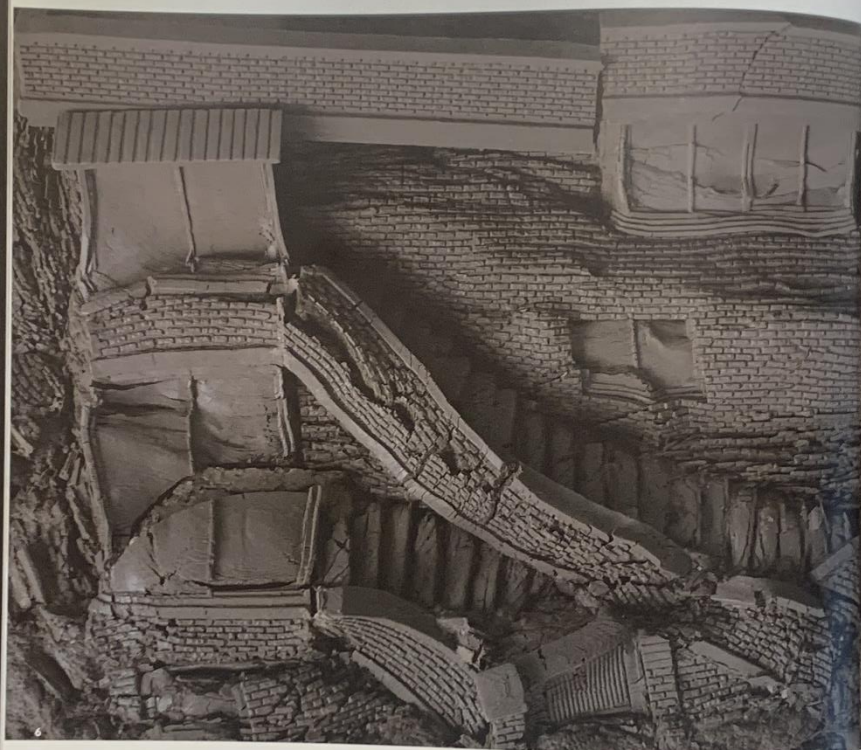
Originally trained in sculpture, Sekyun Ju recollects his childhood memories of Korea's national treasures. He compares faded memories with visual images found on the internet. His interpretations of national treasures are symbolic icons mimicking and paying tribute to ancient ceramic wares. The surface patterns on fired porcelain are drawn with pencil.

Trained in Asian ink brush painting, Haeri Choi creates installations based on ancient paintings. In her 2012 installation, she reproduced objects reminiscent of the eighteenth-century Korean painter Sajeong Shim. The assemblage even included inscriptions or *TiBa*, transforming two-dimensional paintings into three-dimensional installations.

Haesook Jung eliminates function in her forms. She creates organic shapes by joining different vessels together. Originally specialising in painting, her experimentations on vessel forms inevitably led her to work with clay. She combines objects that she makes herself with ready-made ones.



6 Juree Kim – Boan Inn, Tonguei-Dang, Seoul 2010, unfired clay placed in water, 2012, H54cm 7 Younghyun Chung – Farmification (detail of installation), porcelain, 2013, Ø17cm (plate), 1400cm max. 8 Wookjae Maeng – Camouflage, slip-cast porcelain, wood, 2012, H100cm



SOCIETY & ENVIRONMENT Many artists today address issues related to the societal condition of a culture. Often subjects relate to duplicity, contradiction, and social hierarchy. In general, Korea's social environment roots back to Confucian beliefs – filial piety³.

Younghyun Chung attempts to understand the cultural differences between Korea and America. He works mostly with installations and his recent piece observes the gradual transformation of clay when it interacts with water.

Wookjae Maeng excels in working with clay. He creates narrative expressions through animal forms. His pieces have a certain gaze and a dual message – a reflection on the self and suffering animals.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, also known as the Republic of Korea, is a huge metropolis with

more than 10 million inhabitants. The tendency of the Korean government is to knock down old buildings and to replace them with new ones as it costs less than preserving and conserving old buildings. As a result hardly any important historical buildings survive today. Shocked by such government policies, artists record important sites before they are demolished.

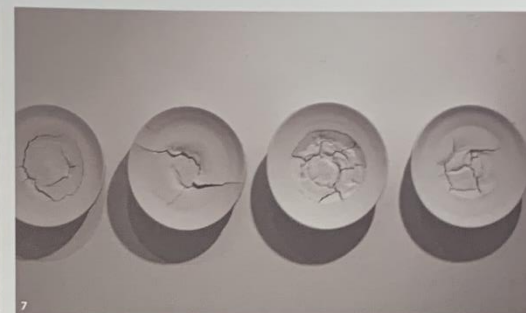
Juree Kim, a sculptor, uses clay simply for its material qualities. She re-constructs buildings that used to exist in different areas of Seoul only to study the process of dissipation when placed in water. Her pieces are unfired and they reflect on the concept of ephemerality.

UNDERSTANDING CERAMICS TODAY Contemporary Korean ceramics in actuality began in the university environment. Since the 1960s a few universities have played a key role. A better insight into

Notes 1 Kang Kyung-Sook, Korean Culture Series 12: Korean Ceramics Korea Foundation, 2008, pp23-24 2 Celadon, Goryeo Period 1918-1919, bunchaeng. Joseon Period lasted for 200 years from 1392-1910. 3 Confucianism was prominent in Korea in the fifteenth century and the fundamental belief, according to

the Analects of Confucius, was filial piety. This is the reciprocal relationship between parent and child, man and country, man and work, man and family. Even today this belief is strongly practised in Korea – respect for parents, one's seniors, one's country, and one's family. Email: hycho.seyarnet@gmail.com Web: Hyeoung Cho - www.facebook.com/

hyeoung.cho.739; Younghyun Chung: www.facebook.com/younghyunchung; Seikyun Ju: jusekyun.blogspot.kr; Wookjae Maeng: wookjae.com; Euijeng Yoo: www.facebook.com/shockeryoo. Hyeoung Cho is a specialist in contemporary Korean ceramics, who works to introduce the field internationally through major exhibitions and venues.



Maeng's pieces have a certain gaze and a dual message – a reflection on the self and suffering animals

contemporary Korean ceramics can be obtained by placing its development with what was happening in twentieth-century Japan and the USA. Ceramics is an important field in Korea, one that represents its history and culture. For this reason it will continue to develop. There are many talented artists in Korea and I hope more exposure will be given to them in the future to contribute to the advancement of contemporary ceramics worldwide. ☐