

Timeless Beauty by Sung Jae Choi

Insa Dong is a crowded, frenetic street in northern Seoul famous for its antique shops and art galleries. A tree lined avenue that once played host to Bernard Leach, Hamada Shoji and Soetsu Yanagi in their search for Korean antiques, has latterly become a tourist magnet. Restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques now outnumber the dusty, musty antique shops, brush shops and galleries.

It was here in a basement gallery that I first encountered the work of Choi Sung Jae. I spent more than an hour looking, touching and admiring almost forty pieces that evoked a fusion of emotion. At one and the same time I felt elation at having found, eventually, contemporary Ponch Ong that transcended pastiche and was saying something new and vibrant while employing an ancient technique. Surprisingly, I also experienced a sense of slight depression. Here were pots that I aspired to, pots that I had been searching for, pots that, in the modern idiom, were to die for and I faced the tough realisation that someone else, and not me, had made them!

These potters are using traditional materials but by extending their making repertoire and incorporating the influences of nineteenth and twentieth century art, both oriental and occidental, they are making a new statement of strength and vitality. Choi Sung Jae is one such potter.

I have watched Sung Jae decorate and it is a wonder to behold. After coating the leather hard clay with a liberal thickness of silica rich white slip he crouches to be at eye level and pauses. The slip requires to be caught at just the right moment. Too wet and it will run – too dry and his finger won't penetrate to the iron rich body beneath. After a few moments of thought and consideration he explodes into a frenzy of quick, darting movements and the scene appears, as if by magic. Of course he has done this many times before and the masterful confidence borne from experience is obvious. His fingers are his primary tools but he will make marks with frayed rope, cloth and rounded wooden sticks. The trademark duck is always done with the thumb and thumbnail.

Choi Sung Jae's pots have an immense and haunting presence. It was this presence that so captivated me that day in the basement Gallery. They are works of importance in a crowded and often mundane ceramic world. Moments captured in a burst of creative passion. Moments with which we are all familiar. (SC26) Those warm and still days on a riverbank watching the ducks winding their way in and out of the overhanging branches of a willow. The movement of the water, the faint breeze that bends a reed, the gentle bow wave as a duck moves gracefully through the water. Most of all Sung Jae's works are what every good ceramic work should be – they are a celebration of clay and glaze.

There is no pretence, nor fuss. The drawing is spontaneous, every mark, every nuance is there to be seen, nothing hidden just as in the Ongii jars I mentioned at the beginning of this piece. The words I used earlier now seem to bear a familiar resonance... *'Glaze and clay caught in a frozen moment of time. A few intense yet measured seconds forever recorded...'*

It is probably a cliché but nevertheless true, that Choi Sung Jae's works are imbued with a timeless quality. They are as much of today as any ceramic can be, yet they carry with them a nation's ceramic heritage in contemporary expression.

- Phil Rogers, 2005. Rhayader, Wales.