

Ro Hae-Sin: Layered Repetition of Crafted Time and Material

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For a long time, Hae-Sin Ro has been working on producing ceramic arts using a technique of industrial slipcasting, while searching for a way to show how the technique itself can render the notion of art and craft. The intention of using the technique is to produce a series of slipcase units that are identical. However, these units evolve into different dimensions, once transformed in various ways, proving that they are not merely made for visual excitement or pleasure, per se. Generally, the material itself and the slipcasting are associated with mass production of ceramic industry rather than satisfy the authentic features of craft that is characterized with unique, individual and original qualities. Ro certainly produces functional ceramic wares with an obvious purpose of everyday use such as vases or mugs. Yet, most of her ceramic works stand on their own feet, exploring visual and spatial perceptions within the realm of contemporary ceramic object and installation rather than a conventional notion of functional craft. Thus, it is appropriate that Ro's ceramic works are to be interpreted beyond the genre of the contemporary ceramics landscape. When examining her ceramic practice, however, she is more focused on craft-oriented issues than visual art; the study on the nature of the material, the relationship of hands and materials, and the way to treat and enhance object surface. In order to search for her solutions, Ro scrutinizes all her process with the upmost craftsmanship and the sophisticated technique.

Hae-Sin Ro's ceramic works intertwine the aspects of art, craft, and industrial ceramics. She pours colored slip into a plaster mould to produce objects or vessels with their surfaces either inlaid or engraved. Layering is the initial process of her work; a pigment, usually yellow green for the base, plus other selections, are added and mixed into several batches of slip, then these various colored slips are poured in one by one, left for a while to harden and settle in, and then poured out of a mould. This multiple layering process is time-consuming; the slip poured into the mould dehumidifies, slowly dries up to the leather hard stage, and then becomes solid due to the interaction of natural property and tension within the slip itself. As the slip dries up and shrinks, the thin, stiff slip layers start to form inside the mould. Ro keeps pouring colored slip in and out of the mould for more than ten times until the slip forms well-defined layers like a crepe cake. By doing so, Ro determines the order of slip layering based on her insight and expertise; that she calculates and predicts all the possible outcomes after firing, trying to estimate how these three color factors – i.e. hue, saturation and lightness –, balance and harmony, and the type of surface treatment and application, that all affect her work.

Eventually, the colored slip poured into the mould forms the outermost surface wall and

its color the main color of a unit. This process enables her to create different images and emotions if she changes the sequence and combination of colored slips to pour inside the mould. Therefore, this is the way her expertise in slipcasting and intention are clearly shown. Gaining well-coordinated layers is not the only concern as the entire object is not complete by colored slip layers poured and settled inside the mould. First, to maintain an even thickness of slip inside a mould, thus to prevent excessive weight of slip, and second, to gain an even height of layer at the carving stage, Ro meticulously works on controlling the drying speed, the distance between the slips and the mould wall, contact and exposure to the air, and the amount of slip to gain the right thickness. Once the first layer hardens as a sheet of deposit, the next slip also starts to form, straightening in parallel, drying right down inside the mould wall due to gravity. With the repeated layering process, slips pile up to deposit from outermost surface towards the set of lower slip layers. Each layer is distinctive and individual in its color, yet firmly built up and united into one solid body. The layered wall may appear light and delicate, yet there exists an absolute sense of space and volume of material and time accumulated under the surface.

Ro's next task is to carve into a surface of multiple layers as if squeezing into a series of gorges to explore a wall of a continuous time built up inside an object unit. It seems as if she is excavating to reveal the genuine substances and matters. This act of carving or engraving is a process of unveiling what is beneath the surface, exploring the concealed layers inside the wall. Taking a visual stroll along the deep and narrow valleys carved on and around her object, viewers are guided to witness the traces of the firm and solid layering process that has been developed into a complete work of art. Her carving process reveals the traces detected from different stages where simple liquid slip takes the form of clay, the whole flow of time taken over each stage of formation, space and volume hidden right underneath the surface, one at a time.

The purpose of carving is more than just drawing or engraving certain images on a vessel or revealing what is hidden underneath the surface. By scraping out the surface using a sharp carving knife, deep, narrow wounds and valleys are created that brushes can never substitute.

The deeper the depth and curvature, the more dramatic the shadow becomes. Painting on a flat plane is a virtual world of time and space that is optical illusion. On the other hand, a ceramic surface represents its physical qualities entailing time, space and texture. A ceramic surface is not just a flat piece of canvas to represent a certain image. It is the physical arena where viewers are invited to experience the striking and powerful sensation of touch and sight, with no visual deception. Basically, the purpose of mark making on the surface is to decorate and enhance visual quality in the perspective of craft, whereas the marks are conceptualized and symbolized in the contemporary object point of view. In order to meet the criteria of these two worlds, Ro chooses to draw certain patterns on her ceramic surface, and then carve them out using a sharp knife to unveil what has been firmly built underneath the delicate sheet

of clay, instead of choosing to express her surface patterns in painterly art using ordinary painting brushes. The carving process requires a keen sense of the depth to avoid piercing through the layered slip.

Ro's carving process is more than just a series of meaningless mark making on a lump of clay. She creates organic patterns that relocate the complex elements of nature in symmetry, fractals, spirals, and chaos based on mathematical and scientific proportion. The way Ro engraves the surface is to apply and repeat formative principles encompassing self-similarity, randomness, non-linearity, irregularity, coincidence, overlapping, change of scale, repetition, and distortion, creating never-ending patterns in a regular manner. The carving process of the artist enables the organic form of nature to be simplified and reconstructed by altering and aligning images. Nature, wind, waves of breath, and vitality are the sources of inspiration that are reinterpreted in Ro's own visual language. The geometric images found in the organic forms belong to nature providing the right sentiment and stability that we all instinctively feel; and this is why Ro continues working on organic forms throughout her ceramic careers.

In the exhibition settings, either a single object unit is placed on a pedestal, or a certain number of units are evenly spaced in groups. The patterns on each individual unit generate repetitious and regular rhythm of waves. This rhythmic wave is further intensified due to the repetition and various colors of the engraved surface patterns. The repetition and overlap of the same pattern of an individual unit are even more intensified when related with other units in a set or group. This interaction allows visual elements such as form, color, or patterns of each object unit to expand and overpower the surrounding space. Consequently, viewers experience an even more dramatic rhythmic wave that is ever expanding and undulating, depending on the direction and position of the viewers. This is why Ro often presents her tiles or objects in groupings as a way of introducing her ceramic arts rather than presents them separately.

However, Ro never fails to maintain unity due to the simplicity and clarity of forms and colors regardless of variables such as the complex patterns of multiple layers, viewer's perspectives and overlap by simultaneity. The simpler the forms and colors are, the more clarifying the surface curvature of objects and the rhythmic waves of engraved patterns become. If the form and color were bolder and richer, her object would lose the sense of regularity, repetition and overlap of the engraved patterns. In order to maintain the dynamic energy derived from the organic patterns and rhythmic waves overpowering viewers and the space, Ro uses simple geometric structures such as a disc, cylinder, and cuboid. Her geometric slip cast forms in fixed dimensions of a mould, give a rigid and sleek first impression, yet when examined thoroughly, viewers are able to perceive the handcrafted warmth and texture the material naturally possesses. To enhance such intimacy, Ro chooses to use subtle, hazy pastel colors. These nature-inspired colors appear more artificial and soothing compared to the real ones found in nature. The first surface slip color tranquilizes and controls the rhythmic waves generated from ten or more colored layers of the same depth underneath the surface,

which compiles the whole layers into one single unit.

To tackle the issue of 'applied arts' in the contemporary ceramics trend, Hae-Sin Ro proposes the most elaborate way to look at the fundamentals of materials, techniques and craftsmanship. Ro scrutinizes the new techniques, forms, and materials of a coming era, while reinterpreting the traditional ceramic techniques to create delicate colors, texture, organic forms and the rhythmic wave of accumulated matter and time. This rhythmic wave stimulates the sense of sight, revitalizing our surroundings, provided by a right degree of vibrancy. Thus, Ro's works take an important stance in the contemporary ceramics trend where time and space are rigorously explored, and abstract and metaphysical elements are transformed into formative ceramic arts. More importantly, Ro's intense and serious ceramic practice and insight are based on criticizing, inheriting, and experimenting this traditional material rather than seeking commercial values and convenience of modern design, or pursuing pure beauty of fine arts. When contemplating Ro's ceramics, we confront issues on the sustainability of materials and techniques, and what to explore and strive for, how to properly inherit traditional crafts and develop modern ceramic aesthetics in this changing world. Through these issues, we perceive a gradual change of the modern Korean ceramic trend with the yearning for metaphysical aesthetics in the world identified with the sense of sight and touch.

Hae-Sin Ro graduated Ewha Womans University in Seoul, having obtained both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees majoring in ceramics. Starting from the 1997 solo exhibitions held at To-Art Space in Seoul and Gallery Shim in Daejeon, Hae-Sin Ro has shown her works in more than 10 solo exhibitions. From 2004 to 2006, Professor Hae-Sin Ro was invited as an artist-in-residence, and as an exchange professor in the National Art School and The College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia. Over the last two decades, she has actively participated in various exhibitions, workshops, and overseas art exchange of ceramic communities. Selections of her works are the permanent collection in Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Crow Asian Art Museum, Dallas, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, and the Korea Ceramic Foundation. Hae-Sin Ro is a professor in the ceramics department at Kongju National University in Republic of Korea.