

Art in America

JUNE/JULY 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

LOCKSGALLERY



Yeesookyung:
Translated Vase,
2013, ceramic shards,
epoxy, gold leaf, 61½
by 36 by 27½ inches;
at Locks.

YEESOOKYUNG

Locks

This exhibition by Korean artist Yeesookyung (b. 1963) was her first solo in North America in nearly 20 years. It overlapped with the Philadelphia Museum of Art's "Treasures from Korea," a wide-ranging survey of the arts of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). Considered a conceptualist, Yee—better known in Asia and Europe—explores elements of Korean traditions, particularly Joseon ceramics.

In Yee's video *Twin Dance* (2012), two women, wearing sheer *hanboks* (traditional Korean dresses) over colorful petticoats, enact a courtesan dance known as *Kyo Bang Choom*. The footage was shot using multiple cameras and spliced together to look like a split-screen image. Mirroring each other in their precise, languid movements, the dancers appear to be enveloped in white mist. This effect evokes Korean vistas in which vapor drifting above a stream or river appears to intermingle with clouds along the horizon. Also on view were four silk-scroll paintings from Yee's series "Flame Variations" (2012-14). Based in part on Tibetan Buddhist scrolls and cave paintings from the Goguryeo Dynasty (37 B.C.E.-668 C.E.), and suggesting nightmarish streams of consciousness, these works portray flame-engulfed landscapes filled with crying nuns, story-book characters (Pinocchio, Snow White, the Cheshire cat), nude nymphs and fiendish monsters.

Yee is best known for her "Translated Vases" (2001-), seven of which were included in the show. Korea was central to the East Asian landscape during the Joseon Dynasty, a period in which celadon

vases were replaced with porcelain ones and a distinct Korean style arose. This style involved a great economy of form and surface design that reflected the Confucian ideal of frugality. During the colonial era, from 1910 to 1945, the Japanese destroyed many of the rare porcelain objects in Korea and closed the workshops that produced them. After the occupation, Korean artisans again began to produce quality ceramic works, in styles associated with the Joseon Dynasty—a practice that continues today. To ensure that the preciousness and reverence of the styles are preserved, the artisans themselves destroy imperfect vessels, leaving only the most pristine examples (as had also been done during the Joseon period).

Intrigued by these ceramic treasures, Yee decided to save shards of porcelain and celadon pots produced by contemporary masters. To create her "Translated Vases," she intuitively recombines these pieces, adhering them with epoxy and carefully tracing the seams with 24-karat gold leaf. The results are precariously balanced, quasi-monumental ensembles with a lyrical and sensuous aesthetic. Rendered common in their fractured state, the vessels regain their precious status through Yee's interventions.

Yee revels in poetry, dance and the essence of diverse art forms. Educated at the Seoul National University in the late 1980s, she takes up a range of traditions and ideas, channeling them through a unique, contemporary point of view.

—A. M. Weaver

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