

Paradoxes and Contradictions: A Lively Crossing of Boundaries

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Over the past twenty years, sculptor Meekyoung Shin has used the familiar medium of soap to recreate ancient Western sculptures and Asian Buddhist statues and ceramics. An exhibition of her pieces is reminiscent of a Madame Tussauds for antiquities, filled with near-perfect reproductions requiring time and labor-intensive craftsmanship. Viewers may admire the remarkably detailed semblance between the artist's works and the original subjects, but Shin's purpose in creating soap sculptures goes beyond provoking superficial fascination. The original pieces, created from sturdy, unchanging materials such as stone and porcelain, have been imbued with the cultural significance of such objects in the quotidian materials of soap, the artist highlights the ineradicable gap between original and reproduction and exposes the subtle distinctions between real and replica.

Just as the Ancient Grecian marbles were conferred new context from their placement in museums after being removed from their place of origin, they have again acquired new cultural context through Shin's recreations in soap. It embodies a complex narrative which exceeds that of simple substitution of medium or dichotomy of original and replica, and through this process of recreation the artist blends the contrasting dualities of a single subject in order to freely travel across boundaries between paradoxes and contradictions such as East and West, decorative and fine arts, quotidian life and art, past and present, artifact and oeuvre, original and replica. Furthermore, she not only exposes the hidden context of objects but also creates new meaning through her own artistic interpretation and translation.

The works of Western art that the artist encountered in Korea were plaster reproductions of Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, used for dessin practice in university entrance examinations and therefore recast in a Koreanized context far from their initial purpose and setting. The ancient sculptures she later viewed in British museums were “authentic,” but preserved in institutions far from their geographical origins and again bereft of their fundamental meaning and purpose. In recreating these pieces in soap, the artist’s varied experiences, and accomplishments permeate the process and result in the creation of original artworks imbued with new meaning. These works are based on Western artworks, but actively reflect the artist’s Eastern perspective and therefore take on a unique identity that is neither entirely Western nor Eastern.

The artist’s elaborate Chinese porcelain recreations also reflect connotations that are not obvious at first glance. In Europe and other western countries, these ceramics were considered to be emblematic of Chinese artistic styles, yet in China they were not held to be authentically Chinese. They were merely pieces produced solely for export purposes and therefore aligned with Western consumer tastes. Chinese but not natively Chinese, Shin’s works illustrate a duality inexplicable from a single perspective while reflecting her own point of view as a 21st-century Asian artist.

Occasionally, Shin incorporates manufactured processes in order to rapidly age her newly-created pieces. She places her works, near-perfect soap reproductions of ancient Western sculptures or Asian Buddhist figures, in restrooms for visitors to use in washing their hands. Artworks which are normally restricted from the touch of the general public are transformed into and consumed as functional, everyday cleansing products, and by gaining the artificial patina from repeated use they metamorphose into the time-worn forms of ancient artifacts before ultimately returning to exhibition galleries. By freely shifting between the various identities of art, artifact, and utilitarian item in a singly object, the artist aims to disorient the audience.

While Shin has so far focused on recreating artifacts to expose their multifaceted meanings, her latest work, *Ruinscape* (2018), attempts a fascinating contextualization in which she

suggests the provenance of her creations. Soap, highly polished as though marble, is used to construct demolished walls, and partial remnants of arches are placed on teetering structures. The scene resembles an excavation site in progress. By demonstrating that her soap recreations, despite their external resemblance, can never have the same origins as those of the Western sculptures that are the subjects of her reproductions, she proposes a context unique to her works.

Here the audience is led to rethink what constitutes the distinction between original and replica. Why has the artist put in so much effort to create such detailed reproductions? What value do her “copies,” created through such complex processes hold? Even without discussing tenets of Eastern Philosophical reasoning (in which “one must know the old in order to know and create the new”), questions regarding appropriation, reinterpretation, and original and imitation have long been present in the context of contemporary art. By intentionally conferring different contexts on her recreations, Shin directs the viewer to discover the distinction between original and replica. This not only reflects the artist’s translation of the original subject, but also opens the possibility for the viewer’s own interpretation.

Shin’s creative philosophy, nimbly traversing the contrasting characteristics and boundaries of a single objet, offers a satisfactory solution to one of contemporary art’s most pressing issues. Even now, American and Western European male artists are considered dominant on the global stage. The expansion of the definition of contemporary art is one of the main concerns of institutions as part of their effort to rectify this imbalance. Firstly, geographical expansion is at the core of this effort, in which the discussion regarding contemporary art extends beyond the traditional centers of Western Europe and the USA to include art from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, it is necessary to look beyond conventional area of fine art, such as painting, sculpture, and installation, to include various media and form, such as those of decorative art or design, in this discussion. Few artists nowadays limit themselves to a single medium, and the state of art has become too complex to delineate the boundaries of fine and decorative arts simply by materials. In addition, it is a central mission of large museums possessing works of various time periods and cultural contexts to apply perspectives of contemporary art to the historical artifacts that constitute the majority of their collections. Viewers tend to relate more readily to works by contemporary artists, and it is necessary to utilize such phenomena to seek ways to breathe new life into ancient and modern art that may feel antiquated.

To Shin, Western art is simultaneously an objective foreign phenomenon which arose from outside her country of origin and a subjective identity that settled in Korea, and her particular translation and interpretation of it is based on her geographical and cultural Korean and Asian background. She presents the significance of Western art as it is gleaned through a Korean lens, and the various contexts that arise from embodying this meaning in her work present a new perspective to viewers. Her method of illustrating the unique position that only an artist of Korea descent can hold without recording into displaying overt, so-called “traditional Korean aesthetics” is a very clever approach indeed.

Shin’s processes, including her unending study of the characteristics of soap to produce perfect reproductions, her analysis of optical developments of various pigments, and the artistic skill involved in creating patterns on the porcelain, are those of a ceramicist mastering the properties of materials by investing time and effort and seeking to perfect the technique necessary in production. This places the artist squarely between ceramic craftsman and artist creator. However, when we consider that the purpose of decorative arts at least partially lies in everyday functionality, Shin’s works fail to qualify as such. On the other hand, the purpose of fine art is the opposite, in which pieces are non-functional yet values. Therefore, the artist’s works, which imitate the appearance and production of porcelain, can be said to occupy a middle ground, in which they qualify as fine art yet have been created with the approach and processes generally reserved for decorative arts.

Through her soap sculptures, Shin symbolically represents the disruption of boundaries caused by the expansion of contemporary art into areas previously excluded from fine art, such as pop culture, mass media, and everyday items. Just as her working process, a result of time-intensive labor, is exceedingly that of craftsmanship yet does not categorize her work as decorative art, it is no longer meaningful to distinguish between fine and decorative arts based on medium or technique in the context of contemporary art, and we can clearly see that the boundaries of fine art have become more flexible and inclusive. Furthermore, the process of modern reinterpretation and re-contextualization of historical artifacts directs the audience’s view to freely traverse the time and space of past and present, place of origin and place of recreation, and therefore allow for a more complex and multi-dimensional understanding of the subject.

Meekyoung Shin says that her purpose in blurring boundaries is to question the values she formerly held as absolute, and through this questioning bring to light additional meanings lying under the surface. The artist, whose processes in sculpting soap to fundamentals of porcelain, she is in the midst of a paradoxical roundabout. The artist has indicated that she intends to continue crossing the boundaries of the notion of hybrid in her search for meaning, and it is exciting to see what new life Meekyoung Shin's efforts will breathe into her future works.