

Perhaps something is wrong, for after climbing the magnificent staircase of the former Museum of Mankind – which has, for the last two years, been home to Haunch of Venison – there is a room full of open crates. On top of them are what appear to be beautifully painted Chinese vases. It is as if the art handlers were disturbed while preparing the kind of exhibition not usually expected in a contemporary gallery. In some galleries there are classical statues. In the largest is a feast of colour, with low platforms holding group after group of translucent glass vases and coloured pots of various sizes. Then it becomes apparent that we have been deceived, for all of the glass vases, all of the painted Chinese porcelain and all of the statues are made of soap. A faint perfume lingers. All these pieces – and there are hundreds of them – are part of the South Korean artist Meekyoung Shin's long-term 'Translation' project, which she started in 1996 when she moved to London, and felt she was part of two worlds and would be misunderstood in both of them.

Alongside the work's sheer virtuosity is a subtle critical position, a reflection on the relationship between East and West, and on different values of beauty. One of the works, *Crouching Aphrodite* (2002–3), is a familiar classical sculpture, yet closer inspection reveals an Asian face, in fact the artist's own. Shin made this work in Seoul, basing it on a photograph found in a book on classical Greek art published by Oxford University Press, casting her own body in the same pose and then modelling the sculpture from the cast. The history of contemporary art might be said to be a series of misunderstandings; translation is perhaps controlled misunderstanding, and this is the beauty of Shin's work. Soap is an extraordinary material, a mixture of fats to which dirt will adhere, and can be washed away. It is a transient material, but many of the materials traditionally associated with sculpture are fragile: bronzes are melted down and the famous Elgin marbles were remains rescued from the lime kilns. Despite the extreme physicality of her work Shin is more interested in the conceptual

notion of soap, which she sees as being far more fragile in the mind than in reality (she has described it as being like a ghost). In the West we traditionally admired the aesthetic notion of permanence, the defiance of change and death; in the East, the leading traditional aesthetic value was transience. Shin's work brings these seemingly irreconcilable aesthetic ideas into one place, translating Eastern aesthetic values into objects; classical statues and oriental vases which are highly valued in the West.

The soap renditions of Chinese vases and of glass vessels are taken from real vases; the classical statues are modelled from actual classical sculpture. There is an allusion to the alien Western aesthetic left behind in South Korea. Shin's work brings together the most precious and the most mundane. Nowhere is this more evident than the pieces in a cabinet within the exhibition, almost hidden behind the dazzling colour and form of the main work, which houses 25 works from Shin's 'Toilet Project' (2004–ongoing). These objects comprise a group of Buddhas, cast from real icons, which Shin placed in toilets throughout the UK and South Korea. While some were destroyed, some stolen, around 100 remain on which people – after their excretions and ablutions, those acts which remind us most uncomfortably of our mortality – have dried their hands. Shin shows us the sheer beauty of the material, configures images of permanence with an impermanent material, making things which seem impossible, a massive exhibition which could be washed away, but will we last longer than these sculptures? Probably not.