

Meekyoung Shin: Artifice and Artefact

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As I approached the dimly lit space of the galley which was once the British Museum's Department of Ethnography at Burlington Gardens, a striking array of semi-transparent ceramic Chinese-style glass vases in hues of fruits and flowers, from blushing rose coloured to sunlit lemons; lime greens and oranges, to sapphire blues and sea green waters, appeared as if suspended a few inches from the ground and the air oddly scented. At least twelve dozens of the objects were grouped together based upon a mélange of colourful hues and tints, located on low, white painted plinths. Lit from above. This serene, cool and silent series of rooms emitted a visceral yet almost corporeal luminescent glow. Although some of the shapes appeared to be replicas of familiar vessels you would see in many Chinese or Greco Roman vases collection, their unusual scale, and their lack of ornamentation were inconsistent with what I expect to see, which added to a sense of an out of context moment, especially as I came to learn, most surprisingly, that each object was meticulously and painstakingly crafted from... soap. This fact alone threw me into a complete sense of disbelief and a presupposition that I might be able to locate the vases into some sort of art historical period or style that I may not have encountered previously. It was both my unease and my sense of awe at what I was now seeing that gave rise to my entering what I can only describe as being in the realm of the uncanny and of the paradoxical nature of the strangely familiar. For Meekyoung Shin's work, the creative process takes on an almost psychological disposition.

In his 1919 essay on *The Uncanny*, Freud used the phrase "...of being robbed of one's eyes," an effect that results from instances of "repetition of the same thing," linking the concept to that of a compulsive action. He includes incidents wherein a person becomes disoriented and attempts to retrace his or her steps, in order to find a sense of familiar surroundings. It is a sensation that Carl Jung would later refer to as synchronicity where two events, or occurrences

happen at the very exact moment and to an earlier colleague of Freud, Otto Rank's concept of the divided self, or "double," in terms of neuroses or paranoia, and the uncertainty of finding oneself in a new and unfamiliar situation. Uncertainty also happens to form the nexus of one of the most telling phrases that the poet John Keats wrote in a letter to his brothers in 1818, following a discussion on what quality went to form a man of achievement referencing Shakespeare as possessing "negative capability." That is when a man is capable of "being in uncertainties" has been argued is the willingness for a person to let whatever is mysterious or doubtful to remain an intuitive appreciation of the creative process, or art, rather than through reason or the pursuit of knowledge. Being in uncertainty as such is an emotional state characterized often by hesitation or indecision and a tension resulting from incompatible inner gratification or desires. However, Keats' creative concept seems positive and full of potential by leaving out 'restlessness' by avoiding an 'irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

In Shin's case, any object she chooses to imitate, whether a Greek or a Chinese vase, an equestrian rider, an ornate cabinet, or old master painting, she conjures in us the sudden loss or destabilization of our sense of the familiar, and becomes instead, the messenger for the uncanny something outside one's familiar knowledge or perceptions, which in encountering objects she creates such as a vessel or container as a carrier or cabinet of sensations. This sense of uncertainty in the artist's work is what continues to make the deepest impression since my first encounter with the Shin's phenomenal artefacts that I described earlier. Her cabinet of curiosities, is one filled not only with objects, like museum artefacts, but with ideas, and concepts that references both past sculptural form, objects, and replicas; but that there is also an element of artifice a term emerging in the early part of the 16th century - here I use the term both to denote the artist's skill and ingenuity at her craft, and to also reference the use of the word art in artifice to its 14th century meaning as a result of practice or knowledge but also as a device to make us see something as rather than something other. This in contrast to its more modern usage of a sense of trickery, or a cunning device being played, which tends to carry a more negative overtone. The roots of the word "artifice" are -ars as in skill, with the Latin *facere* meaning to make. When we speak of "something made cleverly" there is sense of artifice as "artificial," which, although often applied in a derogatory sense, can also simply mean not natural.

Meekyoung Shin is also here addressing the interplay between the industrial and the organic, sensual and to the mechanical; aesthetic values and materiality even though we are now so familiar with the notion that anything can be used to make art - soap, this hinges on the artists ability to creatively shape the raw material by an elaborate liquefying and reconstitution - a form of the alchemical. This interchange between subject-object, incomplete-complete, remains fluid as to how the transformative process. How does the making of soap affect her as well as the relationship with the object she is making?

For me, there are recognizable similarities between Shin's approach to objects and to processes with the Brooklyn based artist, Janine Antoni, although the latter uses her body as a vehicle in a more exacting performative way with audiences. In both their cases, their engagement with soap or polyurethane, resin, as a medium in which to consistently mimic the making of or the transformative reference to the domain of art is notable. Also, as a medium, soap also carries none of the rarified value we place on say sculptures made from bronze, or marble, or paintings with traditional art materials like paint ink or canvas.

Their physical practices often imitate actions which are more commonly the preserve of male artists, referencing Jackson Pollock's pouring, splashing technique and Yves Kline's use of female nudes as paintbrushes, stirring them, using and pressing their bodies on the surface of the wall, as in Antoni's *Loving Care*, piece in 1993, which she dipped her long tresses in wet hair dye and swept the gallery floor with brush stroke motions obviously. But this was also a strategy to involve the audience as they wanted to watch, yet had no choice except to be motioned towards the door as the liquid spread across the room. Then with *Lick and Lather*, series of self-portrait busts, one chocolate, the other made of soap. The encounter with the audience is more pronounced in Antoni's practice as her body is almost always a conduit for the creative process to be acted out - the physical sensations, of knowing, washing, satiation, excess. In contrast, Shin's approach is to engage the viewers' sensorial sensations, as we breathe in the various soaps like a perfume; these are unreadable elements in both their works.

Both artists, operate within postmodern strategies of decoding art historical canons as their subject, yet she is doing more than merely reproducing a 'master painting' in the European style; her Painting Series offers soap in the guise of that which it resembles rather than depicts pictorially, so the viewer has to deal with the frustration and confusion with seeing something as abstract, conceptual, and an emptying out of meaning in place of the frame acting as a vessel or container for something strangely familiar.

There is also an embodying of traditions in her work, of antiquity, of genres; landscape painting - as in Meekyoung Shin's Painting Series which use ornate frames referencing 18th and 19th century European vistas, yet, cast in coloured pigmented soap which was melted, poured and then reconstituted as hard material - the visceral, almost sensual adjectives attributed to these actions, are in sharp contrast to the process of cold soap making by hand itself which can be seriously arduous, needing protective outwear, a boiler suit, and masked against accidental splashes of liquid. It is also vital to have the correct container, adhere to the exact pouring procedures, without breaking the mixing. Knowing that the production process is somewhat dangerous is to recognize that the work conceals all of that precarious preparation to produce a thing of beauty. Yet the notion of casting-replicating precious or rarified objects brings in Shin's relationship to art historical discourse to the fore, and is both playful, and arresting as we are being offered alternative ways to address concepts of resemblance, imitation, casting and vessels as container of meaning. It is also this mixing together of metaphors that are part of the language of art historical narratives and hierarchies, museological classification, taxonomies, artifice, and the obsession with beauty, that has defined how museums are keepers of collections since the time of the cabinet of curiosities - it also appears to be a way for her position herself as outside a Western tradition as an Asian artist, who happens to be female, engaging in the discourse of artefacts usually championed by men - of the traditional philosophizing inclination on seeing as, (an empirical scientific picture) and interpreting that which one sees as a given, or a fact or truth.

With Shin, we are seeing a vase, or vessel because the work is re-presented with many of the attributes of a vase, and as such fits with what some of us are familiar with seeing, what we imagine it to be... we know, as an expression of their visual appearance - the change occurs

when we are given the evidence that they are made from soap which has implications for our sense of touch and smell in this instance. I also read that Shin developed the concept for her Translation series after moving to Europe, a journey which saw her experience transplantation between East and West first hand, not only in language but in culture, in the exploration of uncovering, and an engagement with appreciation, taste and aesthetics and through her work, are now wrestling with centuries of thought on the notion of sensations and perceptions; reality and artifice; inferences and hypothesis - is done through habit.

Shin has the ability to engage the viewer in interpreting and imagining... that these objects may have been in a private or hidden collection, or that they were produced by a very rare or specific technique. The emphasis is now on interesting that which is not readily seen, or explained. All of these conscious inferences are suddenly fragmented when we know they are made from soap... they lose all historical and material contexts that we have imposed on them till this moment, that we have been mistaken with our perceptions all the way through and now left with artistic intention as our starting point. Why Soap, why replicate object, along with many new and seemingly unsolvable problems.

I'm using the term "artifice" both as it denotes the Anglo-French artificium craftsmanship, art, craftiness, equivalent to arti-, combining form of ars - art + -fic-, combining form of facere to do, make but also in its modern meaning as an illusory or fancy. And yet there is also a nod to Western taste and compulsion for Oriental artefacts in particular porcelain or "white gold" as Chinese ware was once known and coveted by aristocrats and kings. Interestingly, in 18th century Europe, Chinese porcelain vases of a scale less common today, were offered in return for prisoners of war, and arcanists, those known to possess secret knowledge concerning ceramics, especially porcelain were seized and incarcerated as they experimented with formulae for making true porcelain, a process previously known only in Asia. The German Meissen factory began life as a secretive test kitchen it is reported, where scientists working for Augustus II of Saxony-Poland, better known as August the Strong(1670–1733), became the first Europeans to develop "True Porcelain" outside of China, Korea, or Japan. Although Meissen made enormous efforts to protect its secrets, there were those ready to take their

knowledge of the formulas and processes to Vienna and Venice, laying the foundations for a European-wide hard-paste porcelain industry.

According to Jonathan Ericsson and E. Gary Stickel writing in 1973 in an article on a proposed classification system of ceramics, one of the foremost problems in archaeology at that time is the cross cultural classification of ceramics. They refer to the leading South Korean art historian, archaeologist and former director of the National Museum of Korea, Won-yong Kim who specialized in Silla ceramics, noted that archaeologists would benefit from collating and determining standardized terms, for pottery - especially for the shapes of ceramic vessels. Local terms for describing ceramics - beakers, amphora for example lacked a clear understanding of vessel shapes.

Yet ultimately, Meekyoung Shin, it's more important that visitors explore two cultures colliding; as she plays with the past and present, the opulent and simple, East and West but it also to engage with the ephemeral, with the fleeting nature of existence as nothing lasts, soap can easily erode, and leave a mere trace, like a spectre emerging from within the space of the uncanny.