

Ancient Future

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In 1871, the German businessman-cum-archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann set out to discover the lost city of Troy. It is said that he had become fascinated by Troy, mythologized in Homer's ancient Greek epic poem Iliad, after seeing an illustration in a book given to him by his father when he was a little boy. When Schliemann began the excavation under the Hisarlik hill in the archaic Troas region of northwest present-day Turkey, he came upon the remnants of a citadel that had once surrounded a prehistoric city.[1] Believing that these walls had once formed parts of the fortification of Troy, Schliemann further validated his findings by claiming to have discovered treasures belonging to the legendary Trojan King Priam. While these were later identified to predate the lifetime of Priam by at a thousand years, at the time, it lent credibility to the veracity of Schliemann's claims that this was indeed the site of Troy.

It is now widely believed that Schliemann actually destroyed the main layers of the real Troy. Nonetheless, today, tourists and archaeology-enthusiasts are offered day trips from Istanbul to Hisarlik to visit what might have been. Half mythology, half history, Schliemann's Troy is just that: Troy by and of Schliemann. His determination to identify Hisarlik as the lost city was crucial to its making, its existence hovering somewhere between myth and reality: "There is a very fine line between historical/archaeological 'fact' and myth, with the distinction being made essentially in relation to contemporary issues and in the contemporary context. The past is thus continually recreated..."[2] But this begs the question: in whose hands, in whose imagination? Once unearthed, the "discoveries" are assigned a new cultural, economic, and socio-political identity by the "discoverers" to be absorbed into, or excluded from, existing value systems and historical narratives. Brandished in the corridors of encyclopedic museums like the British Museum and the Louvre, "The material traces of the past are ordered, classified, presented with identification papers and locked up. The past becomes a vast labyrinthine edifice to be inhabited. The archaeologist wanders the corridors weighed down with keys, administrating, surveilling, dominating." [3] Tales become history; the past enters the present.

Meekyoung Shin's magnificent large-scale installation *Ruinscape* (2018) challenges the authorship of these histories. Rendered completely in soap – the artist's chosen medium of expression for nearly two decades – it resembles an archaeological site in the process of being excavated. Semi-translucent blocks of this everyday material are stacked on top of each other tracing a blueprint for an architectural structure that might have once stood. Inside, columns of different colors and height stand, some resembling limestone, the building material of ancient Greek temples and monuments, and others recalling yellow marble, which adorns the splendid interior of the Roman architectural wonder, the Pantheon. Dispersed amidst this imaginary ruins are fragments of classical statues and sculptures, placed atop plinths and on walls. As one approaches *Ruinscape*, there is a sense of being taken back in time, of time-frozen.

Look carefully, and in fact, something seems amiss. A head of a Roman soldier; a headless saint caressing a baby from 18th century France; a capital of a destroyed column; a bust of a Bodhisattva from China. These religious and vernacular artifacts whose historical period and region of origin span hundreds of years and thousands of miles across the world reside quietly side-by-side. Similarly, architectural elements from distant eras coexist in the same physical structure: a Greek pediment, a three-pointed Gothic arch, an arrow slit of a medieval castle. Disappointment is in stock for those looking for historical accuracy for Western history tells us that none of these objects could have been excavated in the same place at the same time. However, in the hands of a contemporary Korean female artist, centuries collapse, geographies converge. In this case, the compression of time and place is not just metaphorical but literal. The aged appearance of the sculptures exhibited are a result of a process the artist refers to as “weathering,” by being left outdoors for the soap to interact with the environmental factors like rain, sun, and snow, or by being placed in bathrooms of exhibition venues to be used and worn down by visitors. Rather than adopting a conventional museological categorization by civilization and period, Shin's presentation is deliberately unorthodox thus reclaiming her own right to write history:

Social constructions of both the past and the present are pliable, flexible and amenable to different interpretations and interests. Anthropologists [including archaeologists] and historians are master-builders and, as a consequence, their

roles in the complex fields of domination and subjugation need careful investigation.[4]

Ruinscape is a powerful testament to the fact that history is just a tapestry of contending fabrications and anyone can, and should, be a participant in its making.

Shin moved to the U.K. in 1995 to attend the prestigious Slade School of Art in London after completing her undergraduate studies at Seoul National University. During her visits to the British Museum, she recalls being particularly struck by the Parthenon frieze amongst other artifacts that she had only seen as reproductions in art history books as a student back in South Korea. The British Museum, founded in 1753, embodies the imperialist spirit of the time fueled by Enlightenment thinking and colonial appetite. Opportunities for archaeological excavations fueled by colonial expansion allowed the institution, alongside other European museums, to implement a linearly progressive historical timeline that began with the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia and ended with the present day, and create region-specific categorizations, a model that is now adopted by most Western encyclopedic museums. The Western-centric position of the “master-builder” meant that the rest of the world was siloed from this narrative as “primitive,” thus permanently locking them in the past. The drive to subvert and question this claim to authorship has since preoccupied Shin.

This is nowhere more evident than in a series of kouros sculptures Shin began in 2009. Kouros (kouros is the plural) is an Archaic Greek statue of a nude young standing male. Used as both a dedication to the gods in sanctuaries and as a grave monument, a typical kouros stands with his left foot forward and arms at his sides, looking straight ahead. The kouros occupies a pivotal position in Western art history. In his highly influential *The History of Art* (1950), the Viennese-born art historian Ernst Gombrich argues that the evolution of the anatomical realism of kouros embodied the spirit of the Western art historical tradition and progression toward naturalism.[5] It thus occupies a pivotal place in understanding the birth of a “Greek revolution” that paved the path to the Classical period, and is upheld to illustrate the modern Western ideals of cultural and artistic progress.

Standing at various heights, *Translation - Kouros* (2009 -) and *Petrified Times Series* (2018) present the kouros at different stages. We find earlier examples of the kouros dating from their initial appearance (around 615-590 BCE), standing with straight arms at its sides and clenched fists with a downcast gaze. Although one leg is in front of the other as though in a striding pose, he is flat-footed and immobile; details such as muscles and hair are treated in predominantly geometric abstract forms. Among these stand examples of the late kouros – like a replica of the famous Aristodikos Kouros (500 BCE) - which make significant step towards the classical ideal of the male body with a smaller head and more refined and anatomically correct muscle definition and bone structure. The arms also hang detached from the body, providing a more realistic indication of how different body parts relate to one another.

Shin's kouros in *Translation - Kouros* are created in soap to resemble white marble. On the other hand, new works belonging to *Petrified Times Series* are finished with oxidized copper and gilded with gold-leaf, reflecting the title's reference to the process of organic ossification of substance. These challenge our typical association of the kouros with marble – they were produced also in limestone, wood, bronze, ivory, and terracotta – which derives from the tendency to distinguish the Greek tradition as singular despite the fact that its archetype is attributed to Egyptian influences following the re-opening of trade between Greece and Egypt in c. 672 BCE.^[6] By arranging the kouros in an achronological fashion, yet adhering to the conventions of museum presentation such as spotlights and plinths, these works dig at the traditional museological display and expectations.

Yet, when one stands in front of these sculptures, the first impression is of astonishing verisimilitude and technical skill. Not quite parody, not quite imitation, it is a process Shin herself has described as “translation.”^[7] Soap as a material is a perfect metaphor for this. It is slippery; it can dissolve. The process of replication which involves casting, mold-making, and sculpting by hand is as labor-intensive as time-consuming, yet the result is never quite, and cannot ever be, the same as the original. In Shin's work, the art of the past is translated for the present.

For her solo exhibition at Wooyang Museum of Contemporary Art, Shin takes on her most iconic series of work: *Translation Series – Vase* (2006-2013). These are a group

of lustrous, colorful vases based on Chinese porcelain made between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries that were created exclusively to export to a European market, and typically presented by Shin on crates, as though mid-unpacking. The new series, Translation Series – White Porcelain (2018), pays homage to the white porcelain, or baekja, of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) in Korea. First adopted as imperial ware in the fifteenth century, white porcelain quickly became popular and widely manufactured. The most celebrated example is the Moon Jar, its name deriving from its round shape and milky color of the glaze resembling the moon. It has since come to culturally denote the neo-Confucian virtues of austerity, humility and purity associated with Joseon society. Here, however, Shin's incandescent white porcelain vases are not only Korean but take on unexpected shapes of Chinese and Japanese porcelain from differing eras. For those familiar with Shin's Translation Series – Vase, the effect of erasure in these white porcelain series is immediate, not only of the elaborate decorations but of cultural status and economic value that the self-orientalizing ornamentation gave to these domestic objects within the Western rhetoric and market. The déjà-vu effect intensifies as Shin maintains the same presentation: on wooden packing cases that bear labels indicating their journeys across the globe. In doing so, Shin interjects herself as an agent in the production of culture and affirms the important role of the artist in the reimagining mechanisms of history-writing.

The title of the exhibition derives from the book *Ancient Futures: Lessons from Ladakh for a Globalizing World* (2009) by Helena Norberg-Hodge.^[8] In it, Norberg-Hodge studies the impact of corporate globalization and imposition of Western notion of progress on a small Himalayan village of Ladakh. These are lessons dear to Shin. In a technologically-driven world that equates scientific advancement with progress and upholds empirical knowledge as truth, Shin chooses anachronism, re-production, and re-presentation to destabilize inherited truths, knowledge, and history. Like a master-builder, Shin looks back in order to understand how and where we have arrived: “By definition the past cannot be present and yet the traces of the past surround us. The past is both completed and still living.”^[9]

[1] See Michael Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[2] Nandini Rao, "Interpreting silences: symbol and history in the case of Ram Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid," in George C. Bond and Angela Gilliam (eds.), *Social Construction of the Past: Representation as Power* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 154, 161.

[3] Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 10.

[4] Bond and Gilliam (eds.), *Social Construction of the Past*, p. 5.

[5] Ernst Gombrich, *The History of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1950).

[6] S. Rebecca Martin, *The Art of Contact: Comparative Approaches to Greek and Phoenician Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 42.

[7] Meekyoung Shin. Translation (Seoul: Kukje Gallery, 2009).

[8] Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: Lessons from Ladakh for a Globalizing World* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2009).

[9] Shanks and Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology*, p. 7.