

Unfixed: An introduction to the work of Meekyoung Shin

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On our way to the Korean Cultural Centre in London, we crossed Trafalgar Square. Behind us was the National Gallery, one of most renowned museums in the world, full of masterpieces that exemplify the mainstream of Western art history. To our right, having just started its year on the 'Fourth Plinth', we saw Katharina Fritsch's blue Hahn/Cock (2013-14), a smart rejoinder to Nelson's Column, amongst other public sculptures. Around and about were Uganda House, Canada House and South Africa House to remind us that we were in the heart of what was once an empire.

We walk down Northumberland Avenue and there on the left hand side – incidentally, diagonally opposite the Nigerian High Commission – is the Korean Cultural Centre. On entering, we take a flight of stairs off the reception up to a landing that leads to the KCC galleries and there, in the winter of 2013, we encounter an assortment of sculptures of Chinese vases displayed on wooden packing cases. They are made of soap; perhaps we can smell it.

This is a good introduction to the work of Meekyoung Shin (b.1967), a Korean artist who has been living in London since 1997, when she enrolled at The Slade School of Art. Between now and then she has become internationally renowned for her sculpture, meticulously crafted from soap to trick the eye at first glance, Tussauds-like, so close is it in resemblance to its subject matter. It exemplifies her testing interest in notions of authenticity, 'high art' and cross-cultural 'translation', and is especially poignant given that Shin feels herself in a constant state of displacement. She explains:

I often identify myself as someone on the border between cultures. These are borders of gender, nationality, culture and time, all of which I am continually mediating. Having lived abroad and experienced life in different parts of the world, it is hard to categorise my identity as strictly Korean. In many ways, my life and identity is a product [sic] of cultural translation. In everyday life and as an artist, I am constantly translating.¹

The packing cases not only signify the movement literally of cultural artefacts around the world, but also the kinds of translation that preoccupy Shin. Nothing is fixed. And it is a truth almost universally acknowledged that the context of an art object or an artistic gesture determines the way in which it is seen. Contexts constantly shift, and Shin's knowingness in this respect was brought to bear in the exhibition in the winter of 2013, at the KCC an institution dedicated to the promotion and export of her native culture, and the significance of its location in London is not lost on her.

The genesis of art, as we know it, in Asia coincided with an Industrial Revolution that went hand in hand with expanding Western empires. In other words, art became a vehicle for capitalism, an indefinable commodity in a luxury market that invites investment. Shin's sculpture is teasing in its antique disguises – antiques, after all, can command astronomical prices, especially with an aura of preciousness – but then there is no extrapolation of this ruse into other aspects of display. The labels, the press releases, the gallery spiel, all declare that this is contemporary art made from soap.

The nature of soap, its complex message as a medium and the implications of Shin's use of it capture our imagination. As well there is the very practical fact that sculpture students often start to learn by using soap. It is recyclable, extremely malleable and quite cheap. The discrepancy between the rarity that Shin's work suggests, through her extraordinary craftsmanship, and the ubiquity of its material gives rise to a certain frisson.

¹ Meekyoung Shin, 'The Concept of Translation' in Meekyoung Shin. Translation (Seoul: Kukje Gallery, 2009), 10.

As we walk around the corner, to the left of the Chinese vases in the KCC display, we see dozens of vases from Shin's Translation - Ghost series (2007-ongoing), carefully aligned along three long wooden shelves. Like a shopfront display this installation is equally visible from the other side of the plate glass windows, looking out onto Northumberland Avenue. Soap for sale? The collective title reiterates the idea of replication, as does the quantity of units, hinting at a possible infinity of variations on the theme of the vase. Seemingly they could come in all colours, shapes and sizes.

From time immemorial the vase has symbolised femininity, and is as frankly anthropomorphic as Nelson's Column, but it would be a mistake to assert this dimension of Shin's practice at the expense of an understanding of the broader politics that inform her work. They affect her as a Korean abroad, as a woman, and as an artist, and are more abstract. That being said, her concern with the representation of the human body is clearly conveyed in numerous pieces that make direct reference to sculpture of the past, especially statues of Buddha and figures from Classical antiquity, even to the extent that she has cast her own body in the pose of Venus.

Behind the display of the Ghost vases is a large darkened room in which we see live CCTV broadcasts from London's Cavendish Square and Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, featuring Shin's Written in Soap: A Plinth Project (2012-ongoing). An outdoor project, two identical equestrian statues of the Duke of Cumberland – replicating the original in Cavendish Square, dated 1770 – were erected, the one in London in the summer of 2012, and its Korean counterpart in July 2013. Being made of soap and exposed to the elements they quickly started to erode, and the difference a year of weathering makes is made clear to us through the 'real time' relays. The Cavendish Square Duke of Cumberland, for example, has lost his lower left leg. Due to political sensitivities the original statue was ignominiously toppled from its plinth in 1868 – never to be seen again – and Shin's London soap version now stands there instead, quickly fading away. It might not survive the coming winter, to be outlived by Fritsch's Hahn/Cock. More than simply not wanting to stave off the traces of time, Shin is

keen to emphasise them through the use of a soft material completely unsuitable for outdoor sculpture.

Less surprising is the idea of soap in public toilets, but Shin puts it there in the shapes of Buddhas and ancient Greek and Roman heads, so that visitors can wash their hands with the sculptures. Such human touching renders the details in the soap soft and indistinct, and it is this kind of accelerated erosion that the artist features in Toilet Project (2004–ongoing), hence the worn multitude in a room of their own at the KCC. This is the result of collaboration with 16 other galleries and museums in 15 cities across the United Kingdom, each putting their toilets at the disposal of the project. There is so much in the proposition of this work that appeals to us, from its transgressive connotation – whereby works of art are placed in toilets, and there to be touched – to the more philosophical thoughts it engenders. Conventional ideas of artistic authorship, for example, are challenged by Shin’s unashamed copying, let alone the subsequent treatment of her work literally at the hands of countless others. And then there is the aesthetic assumption that art is inversely proportional to utility, but what could be more useful in these circumstances than soap?

On the lower floor of the KCC, the toilets may still be graced by some of Shin’s soap sculptures. We might need to go and check that have not yet disappeared. We can be sure, on the other hand, that not far from here the masterpieces are still in the National Gallery and Nelson is still on his Column.