

## **Corruptible Curiosities**

### **- Looking at Meekyoung Shin's Art through Chinese perspective**

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As close neighbors, Korea and China share similar cultures, particularly in the traditional art forms such as ink painting, ceramics and etc. The Chinese often appreciate artworks with a sense of antiquity. Meekyoung Shin's works seem to offer such impression while the essence of her work rests in the concepts behind her use of material and artistic language. The sophistication in the production of these works often prevents the viewer to identify the material for these sculptures and ceramics being in fact, soap. If the viewer had the opportunity to learn further about Shin's sculpture, one would realize that the transformed shapes are results of touching and using repetitively in the toilet, which may be more appealing to the viewers.

For many Chinese, Buddhist icons are equally sacred and untouchable. The Toilet Project Meekyoung Shin executed in London suggests cultural sensitivity. Because for most British, Buddhist sculptures lack sacred qualities, regardless of taboos, therefore Shin placed oriental Buddhist sculptures and classical Western sculptures made of soap at the toilet sink for people to touch and use. Perhaps it is an everyday phenomenon that the locals only considered them as soaps with a particular form, in which the using of the sculptures naturally transform its shape: the heads are chopped off, or facial features worn off.

Usually, the transformation of appearance is often determined subjectively by the sculptor, rather, Shin has given this right to anyone who happens to encounter. For the artist, there aren't any specific rules or expectations to the outcome of their transformation. In China, or even worldwide, many artists engage the viewers' participation as part of their artwork, while the viewers' response to the artwork is only one of its components, yet their participations do not consist of a proactive component in the productive process. Shin has fully given the right of action in changing the appearance of the sculptures to the viewers in her Toilet Project, moreover the viewers do not have the intention to alter the artwork with any artistic impetus, instead the process is completed naturally through using and touching, thus this largely

eliminates any possibly intervention to the artwork due to the social attributes and class discourse of the viewers.

The primary inspiration for the soap sculptures was to express Shin's first impression of classical western sculptures when she first arrived in London. The Chinese would actually sympathize with Shin's ideas, unlike the icons we have seen throughout the history of art, as one looks at these familiar classical western sculptures with one's own eyes, various emotions and psychological responses are often provoked, and for the artist, she doesn't believe classical sculptures should only exist as historical artworks, but objects that provoke her to make new artworks. Shin's personal and unique impressions made her consider the resemblance of soap to the material of marble, and soap as an everyday item, often allows female artists to make such association, for Shin, the marble is solid, while soap is easily consumed.

German philosopher of the 20th century, Heidegger once stated that the difference between a work of art and an everyday item is that the latter is for consumption, while the former would never be consumed through usage. Meekyoung Shin places the soap sculpture in the toilet, to allow those who frequent the facility to touch and use them, however, once these sculptures enter the art museum, it'd be forbidden to touch. Therein, Shin asks the following question, if the material used to make an artwork is an everyday item that will be consumed, then, should the quality of the artwork be consumed? Indeed, many friends worry about her choice of material, that her work of art would disappear with time. Their worries are valid, because any artist would hope their works of art would exist eternally, instead through translation and renewal conceptually to allow the works of art to interact with the viewer on a deeper level, even though it might be short lived physically, in the contrary, the work would be more valuable. Like the splendid fireworks are consumed in a flash second, yet it may leave resplendent and everlasting memories in one's mind, so why should we be caught up and persistent with the eternal life of an artwork? Neither Buddhism nor contemporary art advocates material immortality, moreover as Albert Einstein's relativity impacts people's thinking, in order to fully represent the state of the world at present through art, one must learn and represent the body through transformation of appearances and the fluidity of objects, especially in the flawed, broken, aged and bodies in pain, such imperfect state of beings should not be purposefully concealed.

Meekyoung Shin also created the deformed bronze, which happened accidentally by pressing on it. Using a Chinese idiom, "hit the mark by a fluke", where the unexpected becomes a way of creating something, like the different outcomes from baking ceramics in the kiln, the

collapse of clay idol. Led by the circumstances, Shin kept the forms of collapsed clay idols, allowing the texture of bronze to alter. The supposedly rigid bronze is no longer upright, by which to guide the viewer to pay attention to the metaphorical differences between the attributes and symbolic meaning of bronze. At the same time, the collapsed bronze also suggests the tension asserted to this object from historical and sociological discourse, such as time, power and etc.

The works of Shin, either the sculptures or the bronzes, are not perfected as we have seen in classical art. Since the end of the 20th century, the destruction of artistic forms has been deeply rooted in the practice of contemporary art. It is a forthright representation of living in the unfair and oppressed reality of the world today. Although artists today may aspire to the complete and perfected classical works of art, while their everyday life experiences constantly remind them the holistic and perfect worldview is no longer valid.

Like many Chinese artists living and working overseas, Meekyoung Shin is often sensitive about her identity, and addresses her doubt to this issue. Under different clashes of cultural contexts to exchange ideas while contests the various existing cultural boundaries are the nurturing approaches to her practice. Shin's exhibition and exchange in China may equally produce international outcomes that will not only bring new input to China, but also providing a new context for her own artistic practice.

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