

Abstract Matters: Condensed Time and History

It is highly fortunate when an artist can obtain his or her own unique language, and it requires a great amount of effort. It is even more difficult to expand the spectrum of one's work by continuously exploring other creative languages. And it is not an easy task to separate the demands of self-replication and variation, while maintaining a stable level of recognition within the art world system. However, it is the fate of many artists to accomplish these demands, despite the immense challenge they offer. Meekyoung Shin could be said to be one such artist. In her recent work, she has once again set out on a bold journey, reflecting on her personal history, this time calling on the notion of "abstract," an area and concept the artist has yet to address in her previous work. Her new solo exhibition *Abstract Matters* showcases the ideas and passion developed by Shin, as she has perfected her work over 30 years as an artist in Korea and overseas. Since early last year, she has resided solely in her studio in the UK, as the country has been in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the UK she immersed herself in pursuing another visual language, one that breaks away from her previous interests in perfect formal rigidity and the principles of cultural translation, and instead focuses on the concept and context of the work itself.

During this period, Meekyoung Shin created 50 new pieces. These were the result of her experiments with ideas of the humanities, form, and genre that aim to reinterpret the vestige of time and daily life, as represented in material constructs from old relics to modern urban architecture. For the majority of her career, the artist has concentrated on various projects depicting antique items and contemporary objects in the medium of soap. These were displayed in Europe's most distinguished museums, including the Hayward Gallery, the British Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK, the Princessehof Ceramics Museum in the Netherlands, and the National Museum in Sweden. However, here her latest solo exhibition explores the notions of condensed time and history, encompassing sculptural, figurative, architectural, and environmental forms within a new focus on the abstract, itself a key concept in art history. If the artist's previous projects translated and deconstructed the power of museums and institutionalized historical products using soap as a medium, and suggested new changing values, her new pieces present and expose the value of the layers of individual lives, reconstructing them like the outer walls of old buildings. At the same time, these new pieces also seek to assert a form of ironic commentary through the use of contemporary abstract imagery, and by minimizing her subjective intervention.

While planning her new project, the artist studied things such as the graffiti on walls during the Middle Ages and the traces of human beings accumulated over time, as well as how weathered marks washed away over time. She also examined the various definitions of abstraction and many artists' attitude toward abstraction, in order to seek the full potential that might be found in sculptural materials. In using a new material, Jesmonite, a medium somewhere between resin and plaster, and inspired by architectural texture, Shin experiments with the potential of abstract formative expression using sculptural techniques, attempting a version of 'plane sculpture' creatively located between the realm of sculpture and non-sculpture, while superficially maintaining a focus on a flat planar form. In her practice, Shin reduces her intervention and removes herself from the production process through an impromptu method, while introducing the possibility of subconscious expression, something which was impossible in the practice she used to create her previous *Translation series*. Through this approach, Shin has here expanded her creative context through various sculptural experiments.

In creating these new works, Shin sprinkles paint of various colors on waste rubber plates, Styrofoam, and glass plates, and fills in the inside with several layers, mixing crushed rocks, iron shavings, and gold and silver foil with Jesmonite. The texture emerges through the forms of the old rubber plates, worn-out objects and the surface of Styrofoam, all of which are used like molds to create a cast that appears as slightly corroded or inlaid. On these sculptures the bumps along the surface take on a new state, exposing the exterior of the new object in manner somewhat akin to planographic printing. When the rubber plates, or mold, are removed after the materials harden, a bumpy surface is revealed and the resulting image emphasizes a coincidental effect that is beyond imagination. Ironically, the artist then sometimes planes away the surface with a grinder, and only reaches a satisfying outcome after repeating this painstaking process until completely understanding the properties of the materials and experiencing several failures. The coincidence that occurs deconstructs the illusion of the image and the conventional image becomes an abstract painting transfigured as a flat sculptural surface. The pieces take on the form of plane surface using various techniques and materials that combine to encapsulate the art historical concepts of abstract and coincidence. While these works also take images as a referential point, the process behind their creation is more akin to the practice of sculptural printing or casting sculpture, and ironically creates holistic pieces. Now that Shin's creative language has been liberated from the act of translation, a variation of diverse mediatic interests have been unveiled within her practice, based on techniques and styles that serve to refigure countless art historical references.

Meekyoung Shin has to date held a total of 29 solo exhibitions, fiercely and tirelessly focusing on her work, over the last 28 years in London and Seoul. Within these she has strived to recreate historical relics and artworks that re-present certain ideas of culture with a contemporary perspective using soap. By 'translating' the experience of various religious, historical, and cultural contexts into soap sculptures based on the forms of ceramic vessels and Buddha statues, Shin usefully questioned notions of "absolute value." At first, she found a visual similarity between Western classical stone sculptures and soap and began to express her interest from an outsiders perspective, in other words, drawing upon the discourses of post-colonialism. She also created symbolic sculptures of the Classical period in the West employing soap, with an interest in the fundamentally conflicting properties of permanency and impermanency, as reflected in the media of marble and soap. More recently, she took these interests a step further and focused on artifacts preserved within the museum system, creating pieces based on themes, such as 'making it a relic' and 'translation'. Through this interest, Shin delved critically deeper into the process by which an object that was once a decoration, an object of worship, or an everyday object, become antiquities and are placed on display within a museum – a moment at which time stops and the objects lose their original function, only to continue to exist as relics. Her new solo exhibition began from a point opposite to these past works and concerns, but ironically, remaining in close relation to them, gaining a notion of liberation by using the principles and forms of abstraction, concerns entirely different from those that defined her previous practice.

The artist worked in soap for a long time, presenting various projects (*Translation series, Ghost series, Toilet Project, Weathering Project, Written in Soap: A Plinth Project, Ruinscape, A Petrified Time, and Painting series*), but continued to study the media of ceramic and glass, based on her strong determination to diversify the palette of materials she used. In 2019, Shin opened a solo exhibition *Weathering*, featuring ceramics at Barakat Gallery in London. And her new solo exhibition *Abstract Matters* this year at CR Collective, Seoul, will provide a platform to further explore the artist's boundary crossing diversification of the medium, as she develops it into another visual language.

The concept of abstract, which is addressed in the exhibition, has long been explored in the history of art. To the artist, the notion of abstract becomes a certain goal to achieve or an issue to restate rather than something representative of the desire to seek truth or to depict in detail. There is an irony imbued in this process, and exposing this point is a feature unique to the artist's world and her attitude toward repetition within her practice. Discovering the irony by dismantling the process in a conventional result, rather than exploring the completely new or the search for essence, is the meaning the artist passionately strives for. If we feel that the form and

context of her work appears similar to that of ancient wall paintings or the exterior walls of old buildings around us, or serves to remind us of numerous examples of extant abstract art imagery, it is evidence that the abstract is already an exclusive property of a special style, while ironically also a concept widespread and part of our everyday lives.

Yet, the artist's experiment maintains a distance from the idea of abstract as a concept already widely involved in our lives and language to the point of reappropriating and criticizing existing discourse on abstract expressionists and minimalists differentiated through special discourse by certain artists or critics. It also keeps its distance from the concern to prove the scope of sculpture, as expanded through the dialectical tension between sculpture and non-sculpture. In this respect, the artist's work pursues an entirely contemporary context of meaning, one that serves to expose a strategy of ironic dismantling at the point of such strategies and sociocultural differences, the history of individuals in time and environment beyond the play of politics and power, and at least slightly free from any impure intentions or artistic intervention.

Meekyoung Shin identifies that her reason for being an artist lies within the process of 'moving toward a new state liberated from prejudices by interpreting existing things in a new way'. Finding the most fitting form for that attitude is her *raison d'être* as an artist, and representative of her way to do art. That the artist has consistently pursued this single point for almost 30 years without arrogance, justification, exhaustion or turning back is remarkable to the point of being extraordinary.