

Sculpture is on the surface

Yoo Jin-Sang

Three statues of male youth are positioned in front of the museum's blue glass wall in the water pool. These sculptures that appear to have risen from the sea like white nymphs have been already washed and worn away by rain, wind, and sun as if they had been standing there for a long time. *Kuros*, statues of standing nude male youths of the Archaic period were first made around 660 B.C., and they mark the beginning period of Greek art. *Kuros* are one of the most important artworks in the pantheon of Western art history and aesthetics. A small number of *Kuros* replicas crossed over to Korea with the help of the Korean-Greek Cultural Exchange Foundation and the Department of Sculpture at the Seoul National University, College of Fine Arts has kept the works for more than 20 years. Meekyoung Shin has seen these *Kuros* since her university days and she made her own soap *Kuros* by copying the replicas made of plaster. Shin's sculptures were installed for approximately three months from September to November in the outdoor water pool at Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art. The museum visitors were able to have the unique experience of observing the weathering the process of the sculptures as the soap melted and washed away in the wind and rain. *Kuros* are the most recent series of Meekyoung Shin's Translation project. In order to be realized as a complete work, the sculptures were moved indoors after they had been installed outdoors for a fixed period of time. Unlike the original works kept at a museum in Europe under conservation, the sculptures made of soap recorded the flow of time on their delicate surfaces, a process that was abruptly stopped when they were moved indoors.

Like many other art students in Korea, Meekyoung Shin copied European sculpture as part of her studies. Drawing the sculptures of Greek, Roman, and Renaissance periods like *Venus de Milo*, *Agrippa*, and *Giuliana de' Medici* form the 'canon', or the structural and contextual foundation of Korean contemporary art education. Drawing studies that place emphasis on the accurate depiction of the subject based on perspective drawing and studies of realistic oil painting and sculpture were first introduced to Japan when it was actively engaged in exchange with Europe during the Meiji era in the 19th century. Around the time when Japanese prints were making an impact among European Impressionists, the Japanese were beginning to accept realism drawing of the subject passed to Korea in the early 20th century. The general concept of art we are familiar with can be said to have been shaped and formed essentially by trade and communication over a relatively short period of time. When Meekyoung Shin went to the U.K. for her studies in mid 90's she visited the British Museum and other European museums, where she was able to see the original sculptures, she had copied in Korea. She must have felt the same emotions as that of so many other art students in Asia. The experience of seeing the original artworks in their actual location – for a non-European who has already seen them many times in another place, in another context, stirred up a very unique sentiment in the mind of the artist. What modernism brought to artist in Asia, or even further to the non-Western regions overall is not only the canonical definition and traditional methodology of art but a sense of alienation, distance and absence. Therefore,

it is of no surprise that Meekyoung Shin took an interest in the sense of absence she felt when she encountered the original works she had replicated in the past. Her reaction was complicated, however, by the fact that both originals and their replicas are separated from their original locations, such as the Frieze sculptures of The Parthenon in the British Museum. In addition, the copies act as reference materials that stress the sense of absence in the original work. Objects are distanced and separated from their original context in which they were first formed through diverse forms of movement including plundering, dissemination, exchange, and trade. In effect, they are transformed into something else that is completely different. Therefore, 'translation' points to the transfer of objects and its associated contextual changes.

In 2002, Meekyoung Shin made *Crouching Aphrodite* using soap, as a replica of the original sculpture in the Musee de Louvre, entitled *The Venus of Vienne*. The *Venus of Vienne* was made in the Roman era between 240-200 B.C. It is also a replica of another original. Shin's *Crouching Aphrodite* copied all of the wear and damage that had occurred to the original plaster replica throughout the years. The artist made the marble statue in soap using her own body. This work in particular highlights the relationship between the original and its replicated original. An artwork does not simply move from one place to another, but in the process of migration, the viewers who look at the work construct a new identity based on their historical background and by becoming aesthetically inspired. The artist expresses the subject's formality of her own understanding using her own body to make it contemporary. 'Translation' implies an impossible transfer. Nothing can be translated identically to its original. This is because separation, transformation, mistranslation of the original takes shape in different culture and languages. Moreover, it is inevitable due to the differences in its placement, time, viewer, and context. Meekyoung Shin's work can be said to be a type of 're-writing' because she makes sculptures that are 'similar' to the original work. One such example of this is how a 'palimpsest' that has been scraped and used again countless times can reveal multiple voices in the layers of usage. Its underlying meaning of overlapping identity in 'multiples of appropriation' calls to attention the readers and writers in the cycle who bring confusion to the reader. The 'translation' of Meekyoung Shin adds a sense of suspense and strain to those viewing the work because of its multiple layers – the original sculpture, the first replica, the replicas that have been repeatedly copied, and finally, Shin's own version of the sculpture that is both a copy and an original, and made of soap, a material more fragile than its prototype.

Meekyoung Shin began working with soap early on in the process of modelling and replicating Greek sculptures. Soap became a decisive element in her artistic practices. It is easy to handle, inexpensive, malleable, and most importantly, its pliability allows Shin to make extremely realistic reproductions. But in spite of this, using an everyday material and not a conventional art material presents a great adventure for a sculptor. Soap is excessively soft unlike marble, stone, or bronze. It therefore poses a great deal of challenges for a sculptor, like erosion, which makes it difficult to conserve. In the case of realistic sculptures or figures seen as Madame Tussauds, for example, beeswax is used – but soap – due to its natural and purest form as an object that is used, in effect, to 'wash', gives off a much more

sensitive and unstable impression. For the past ten years, Meekyoung Shin has sought to overcome the weakness of using soap and has now solved many of the related problems. But on the other hand, some of her works are actually used as 'soaps'. Shin began the Buddha series in 2007, casting statues of Buddha to be used as soap in washrooms. Visitors were invited to use the soap by rubbing the statuettes with their hands, which caused the Buddhas to gradually wear away. After being placed in the toilets for a fixed period of time, the Buddha showing the deterioration became a completed artwork that was shown to the audience. The rapid disintegration of the soap contrasts with a conventional art material which deteriorates very slowly. Thus, soap accelerates the process of wear and age. Soap is not only a useful object, but it is a useful object. Moreover, its usefulness materializes with its decomposition and disappearance. Therefore, the act of 'washing' and the placement of the Buddha statue in a toilet that results in its deterioration are two distinct but overlapping themes that lead the viewer to experience the concept of 'translation' in new and powerful ways. This series differentiates itself from other works by Shin because of the 'usage' (which is actually implied by its material). That is to say, Greek statues were replicated using soap but were not used but the Buddha statuettes are both sculptures and soap at the same time. The use of the Buddha to wash away the audiences' dirt calls to mind the story of Buddha reaching enlightenment and then showing the way for others to save themselves by sacrificing himself.

Shin's sculptures are made from a model that replicates another cast. The replica is only significant in its relationship to the original. Greek sculptures, religious medical art, and decorative art of the Renaissance and Baroque periods seem to be fixed in their current location, historicity, and their status, but in reality, the originals also have belonged elsewhere and have been used in different contexts. For the past few years, Meekyoung Shin has been also reproducing vases using soap. To consider the history of vases, for example, the famous British 'Bone China' – as its name suggests – originated in China and travelled to the West. The importance of chinaware follows the trade route of Great Britain and itself carries a history of cultural migration, translation, re-interpretation, and reproduction. Likewise, Korean vases also best exemplify the history of cultural exchange between Korea-China-Japan in the middle Far East Asia. Using soap, Meekyoung Shin has replicated potteries that represent the height of cultural exchange between China and Korea. At times, the original used by Shin are actually replicas of inexpensive originals. These vases are displayed immediately as they are removed from the wooden crates that were to transport them rather than glass vitrines, typical of most museum displays. This method of exhibition emphasizes the continuous journey of the replicate vases to the viewer. Furthermore, the soap vases appear to float in mid-air because of the mirror placed on the crate – the only decorative element in the display. The vases always appear to have just arrived or are getting ready for departure; they are never anchored anywhere. Therefore, Shin's work provides the clearest example of transference and exchange, appropriation and reinterpretation. Just as her artworks made of soap endlessly rotate in a cycle of 'writing-rewriting', the engagement in an exchange of forms and a language rooted in diverse cultures, regions, and times, allows the audience to experience and discover the flow of a greater cycle. For the artist, 'reproduction' follows this course of circulation as the focal point for all stages from its origination, creation, production,

disappearance, to reproduction. It is important to note that her works are not limited to the category of 'postproduction'. In theory, a single cast or a model which produces unlimited imitations can begin to emit transcendental light at a certain point. Through the imitations, the original acts as an abstract index that accentuates the original's location and historical period. This is the aura that Walter Benjamin critiqued in his seminal exploration of the original, but on the other hand, Leibniz's ideas about the relationship between one and many recall an entirely different argument. Leibniz's thoughts call to mind the cycle that is made of one of a majority and the singularity of multiples; that is, the circulation that is dependent on the one-many, many-one, one-one, or many-many. Moreover, a single segment reflects a whole and the whole is reflected in each small segment, and different segments create a combination of the whole picture. Thus, when we consider the relationship formed by the combination in which a whole creates an infinite number of wholes, a conventional relationship between the original and the copy is not limited to one belonging to the other. Rather it is a link in an infinite series of chains. As a kind of a link, Shin's work reveals the hidden parts of the whole chain through reflection.

The level of realism in Meekyoung Shin's work is extraordinary. This effect is possible due to the suppleness of the soap material. Additionally, soap enables coloring, transparency, exquisite details, and smoothness, which sometimes renders a reproduction that is even more sensual and elaborate than the original. Also, Shin sometimes applies colour to her works although the originals were without colour. In particular, some of the Greek sculptures have been colored with various skin tones even though the originals were in white. These processes of the artist transcend the simple reproduction of sculptures. Her inclination for realism itself suggests room for another interpretation. Many of her works go through an extensive colouring process. Since Shin can paint, draw, and fix the surface many times, she can push the realism of her works to the utmost. This kind of emphasis to the exterior can be understood as an act of inscription on the surface of the soap. As a principle of pure reproduction, her sculptures reflect the world they are placed in. The mirror reflects the subject placed in front of it and her sculptures reflect the viewpoints and the gaze that surrounds it. Just as illusion exists on the surface, her sculptures exist on the surface of that illusion. And thus sculpture is not a simple visual reflection but a reflection on the form of its existence. Looking at the frail existence of the subject that is momentarily stopped in its long cyclic journey evokes the same sentiment as gazing at a certain point in the cycle of Buddhist reincarnation. This illusion is exceptionally forceful, and its existence is markedly ephemeral. Perhaps this is the reason why Meekyoung Shin created Buddha statues that wear away in the toilets by the hands that use the sculpture as soap. The Buddha statues that barely retain their initial figure have an uncanny presence – as they appear familiar but in reality, they have never been seen before. It is astonishing that the worn and washed away part of the statue, haunts and glimmers like an afterimage. A part of the sculpture will now remain invisible to the eye. It is especially interesting that the universal veneration evoked by this impressive artwork initiated from the use of soap. The sculpture can be touched and in actuality, this is what causes it to be worn away. All of her works inherently carry this possibility – that you can always wash yourself by using the work. But at this given moment, you are merely looking at that idea. Therefore the sculpture exists on the surface of that thought.