

How do you say it in your language?

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Its time to wash my hands, behind the wash basin is a sculpture in the form of a Buddha, its made of soap and I'm invited to use it by rubbing my hands over its head to build up a lather then rinsing them under the tap. I do this with some trepidation because I know that part of it will adhere to my skin and wash away, my skin will be cleaner, but the sculpture will be just that little bit less than it was before. By washing my hands on the sculpture I've just contributed in some small way to a work which is part of the long term Translation - Toilet Project by the Korean born artist Meekyoung Shin. These works will eventually leave their places besides the wash basins and be shown in partially eroded form in galleries and museums.

Soap is a very strange substance, a mixture of two substances you would not usually want on your skin, or associate with being clean: fats and ashes, animal or vegetable oils mixed with potash. Processed in the right way a chemical reaction called saponification occurs creating a new substance, which we know as soap which acts as a " handle" dissolving the dirt and also rendering it soluble in water. The process is ancient, a soap formula exists, a mixture of water, alkali, and cassia oil written on a Babylonian clay tablet from around 2200 BCE.¹ In the West we mainly owe our knowledge of soap to the Muslim world, most modern soaps are little changed from the Arabian soaps of the Middle Ages. In the classical world it was known but not used for cleaning. Soap although seemingly unusual as a sculptural material has, in fact, a history of being used for sculptural ends. It can be cast, carved, modeled, engraved, even painted.² Meekyoung Shin has mastered all these techniques with dazzling skill, and more importantly has chosen to do so with a great sense of purpose.

Washing is a symbolic, as well as practical act, in the Western Christian world the most significant act of washing is, perhaps, that of Pontius Pilate the Prefect of the Roman Province

¹ Wilcox, Michael, "soap" in Hilda Butler. Poucher's Perfumes, Cosmetics and Soaps (10th edition.) .
Dortrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers. pp. 453

² Jack C. Rich, The Materials and Methods of Sculpture, Oxford University Press, 1947, pp 357 - 358

of Judea (CE 26 - CE 36) Pilate is mentioned in all the canonical gospels; Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. It is in Matthew that Pilate famously washes his hands of the fate of Jesus. The phrase: "to wash your hands of it" is still in common usage in the West meaning to wash away responsibility. It is also an activity, as Shin has emphasized, usually seen as women's work. Women are traditionally expected to clean and were, and in many cases still are, judged by their ability to clean and to be clean.

My hands are clean, yet some other transference has taken place. I have touched the sculpture, a copy or rather a "translation" of an actual religious idol. I have worn some small part of it away. I have in turn been made clean, but to touch an idol is also to be some how blessed in return. We are all familiar with idols in Churches or Temples where the Madonna's have feet polished by the supplicant kisses of believers, or the heads of Buddha's are worn away by the single touches of those who reach to gain access to the Western Paradise, or some small gift to ease daily life. Through out the world ikons to every known belief have some aspect of touching or being made ceremoniously clean. To wash, to touch, it seems such a simple act, normal, every day, but in fact it is a very complex transaction: Practical, chemical, historical, cultural, and gendered. Meekyoung Shin encapsulates this artistic project under the term: translation, but what does Meekyoung Shin mean by translation?

In his book "Mouse or Rat, translation as negotiation"³ Umberto Eco outlines some of the criteria of translation, the first he refers to as "...translation proper (that is, from one natural language to another)".⁴ Let us take one of Meekyoung Shins best known works ' Crouching Aphrodite 2002. This is a sculpture in soap coloured to resemble marble, cast and modeled over an armature of wood and steel. 90 x90 x 70 cm. The sculpture is based on a Roman copy, of which the cast in the Louvre is 115 cm x 74 cm x 58 cm, of a work also known as The Venus of Vienne, the original being attributed to Diodalos of Byhinia who was active between 240 and 200 BCE. In fact there are many versions of this particular classical pose, most of them Roman copies. Crouching Aphrodite 2002 is a cast taken from the artists body in the pose of these well known statues. Significantly it is widely accepted that the the goddess of beauty is being interrupted whilst bathing, or at her toilet. There are many issues here but let us return to the first. Is this "translation proper" as in from one natural language to another? At first it would

³ Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat, translation as negotiation*, A Phoenix paperback, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, GB 2003.

⁴ *ibid*, p.2

seem not as they are both sculptures, however I would say this assumption is incorrect. Sculpture as a distinct aesthetic (as in separate from religious and ritual life) is a completely Western concept.⁵ Western style sculpture, a tradition in which Meekyoung Shin was trained at, and became expert at, while studying at Seoul National University, was introduced to Korea when Kim Pok-chin was sent to study at the Tokyo School of Fine Art in 1919 during the Japanese occupation of Korea⁶ The Japanese had imported these techniques, mainly from Italy at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. So yes I would say this is " translation proper". The artist translates the notion of a sculpture of a woman, from a Western tradition, and in the West the human figure remains the basic paradigm of beauty, by using her own body to translate a Western image into an Eastern form through her own experience as an artist who has trained and works in both Korea and England.

Eco goes on to discuss aspects of translation, one he describes simply as length, saying it would be unreasonable if a manuscript of two hundred A4 pages using the same size and type of font was returned translated with four hundred pages. Shin's translation's as we have seen above remain close to scale. Eco then contrasts Disney's "translation" of Pinocchio in contrast to Collodi's original text. Meekyoung's Shins "translation" does not resemble Disney's. Her work is not a major reconfiguration of the story, it is not a substitute for the original. Then Eco talks about idioms: how a phrase in one language if translated literally would not make sense, but would if exchanged for a matching idiom in another language with the same meaning. Eco uses the English phrase " to pull someone's leg" which means to tease someone and suggests to translate this literally into Italian would be meaningless , but to translate this as "to pull someone's nose" would give exactly the right impression to the reader. Shin's work doesn't seem to be about idioms, but there is a clear exchange of style and terms in keeping with this notion of Umberto Eco's. In this body of work Shin transposes an Eastern body type, usually her own, over the idealized Western body type in the classical works she is referring to. Eco states that the translation must be "literally unfaithful".⁷ He also mentions adequacy, equivalence and faithfulness. I think it is clear Meekyoung's Shins work does meet these criteria, but meets them in terms appropriate to her media. Most importantly Eco describes

⁵ See: Paul Oskar Kristellar, *The modern System of the Arts, in Renaissance Thought and the Arts*, collected essays, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1980, pp 163-227

⁶ Kim Pok-yong, *Modern Sculpture Responds to International Trends*, Korean Arts Guide, Yekyong Publications Co., Ltd, pp 90-91

⁷ Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat*, translation as negotiation, A Phoenix paperback, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, GB 2003.p5.

translation as a form of negotiation. This is where the work of Meekyoung Shin operates, we stand in front of one of her works and we have to begin to negotiate, to interchange existing paradigms of thought, familiar images with slight shifts in meaning, changes of materials, the shift from one language to another. In this work she translates Western notions of the idealized female body, into real Eastern female form.

In some works in the continuing series of figurative "translations" of classical sculpture Shin has added tints, added colour. It is known that classical statues were coloured, but this 19th century discovery posed problems for the Victorians who felt at ease with nude statuettes and sculpture as long as it was in the classical manner and monochrome. The most famous example was Canova's British pupil John Gibson (1790 - 1866) whose Tinted Venus (1851-6), now in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, caused an outrage at the time been seen as vulgarizing the art of sculpture and being far too life like and hence erotic. Meekyoung Shin's use of colour in the soap allows her to both to remind us of this debate and to give her "translations" an uncanny presence. It emphasizes the material: soap, and the associations of that material with the body. There is something else we must not forget, these sculptures now in our museums were once in private hands, they were trophies, they were symbols of knowledge and power. Symbols of the supposed superiority of Western values, they were also a mechanism of exchange and trade, either in themselves or through their replications. and as Margaret Visser has said when discussing food: " Women have always been another symbol, used for the knitting together of families and tribes; they too are 'given away' in marriage, shared, stolen, used to enhance status, or abstained from."⁸ All translations have to closely question the original, unpick the underlying issues and then re present them in a new language. For those that are bi lingual these differentiation's are clearly apparent, and Shins work allows us this pleasure, reveals her interrogation of the original.

Recently she has built a new body of work where the translation is seemingly less complex: the Translation - Vase series, and the Translation- Glass Bottle series. These technically extraordinary works are replicas in soap of Chinese ceramic vases made for consumption by Western markets. again a system of exchange. Meekyoung Shin sometimes shows these works on open crates standing on mirrors, sometimes on plinths. by doing this Shin also opens out notions of transportation, protection and storage. Most sculpture, most art if not actually on

⁸ Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner, the origins of, evolution, eccentricities, and meaning of table manners*, Penguin Books, London, 1991.p3

display is stored in crates, and when it is on display it has to have some mechanism to protect, to distance it from the actual world; a plinth, a podium or a vitrine.

There is direct translation from one language to another, from ceramic or glass(both are made from silicates heated to very high temperatures) to soap, that curious mixture of organic and inorganic materials. The realism of this translation is breathtaking, we can fully believe that there is access to these works in a different medium, from one language to another. But again, as is often the case, with Shin's work there is a difficult contrast to over come. Ceramic and glass is fragile, but as a material virtually indestructible, most of our knowledge of prehistoric cultures comes to us through the remains of their ceramics. Soap is in fact a very durable material if like paper it is kept in the right conditions, but if not it is very transient, it can literally be washed away.

Korea has been and still is one of the most significant producers of ceramics. A heritage which is universally admired. In 2007 I visited the British Museum with the artist on the occasion of the display of her work: Translation: Moon Jar 2007 in the Korean galleries of the museum. First of all we went to see a special display of a Moon Jar in the collection. A truly beautiful pot, and interestingly donated to the British Museum by Bernard Leach, perhaps the most influential Western potter of the modern era. Leach, an ex Slade student like Meekyoung Shin was a close associate of the Japanese aesthetic theorist and founder of Mingei Yanagi Soetsu. Yanagi was a great supporter of Korean art and of its ceramics in particular. It was their work which made available so many of the wonders of Korean ceramics to the West. Later we went up to see the Translation: Moon Jar 2007, displayed in a vitrine just like the original. It was only by reading the label that it was possible to believe it was soap and not ceramic. The Moon Jar in the lower gallery had been handled, touched by many hands, Leach must have held it, yet there is no trace of him other than the label. The trace of everybody who had touched had been cleaned from its surface. Meekyoung Shin's Moon Jar, could be just washed away, both were fragile but in very different ways.

All of Meekyoung Shin's work, has this quality, it needs to be cared for, protected, maintained, its fragility reminds us of our own. How we need to care for ourselves, our families, our friends, our environment, our cultural heritage and our cultural exchanges. Just how hard it is to make these things and how hard it is to look after them. Meekyoung Shin has made works you can wash your hands on but one thing is for certain this is not work you can wash your hands of.

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