

In Studio with Lee Jong Min

Evelyne Schoenmann



photos - Ye Gum Hae

Lee, I always ask my guest about their educational background in ceramics. What is yours?

I graduated from the Department of Crafts, College of Fine Arts at Chung-Ang University in Anseong, South Korea. I became interested in ceramics after taking the ceramics course, one of the required subjects, and decided on ceramics as my major.

Partly the shapes of your works remind me of the prunus vases and other shapes from your Korean heritage. But the carving patterns seem very modern....

I consider my works based on the Korean ceramic tradition but they are also couched in my own distinct idioms and aesthetic senses. I was able to create and evolve new works by encountering the cultures of the times. When working on my pieces, I try to preserve and respect traditional ceramic making techniques as much as possible, but I make forays into new things through my own research and creative practice in each process of preparing materials and making pieces. For example, I have conducted research on how to reinforce solidity and colour development by completely removing iron from preexisting white porcelain clay; on how to make thick vessels by wheel throwing; on how to sculpt a thoroughly dried vessel; and on applying glazes to dense sculptures. I think the reason why my work appears modern while it derives from tradition is because I added one more process to decoration. I have drawn from traditional decorative patterns of insects, plants, and natural objects but also created vessels through a combination of new patterns and forms in my own manner. This is what I have been most concerned about and considered most important in the course of my work.

Unlike the old Korean vases, the openings of your works are extremely narrow. Is this due to the shape or the

carving? Or does it have completely different reasons

I pursue modern shapes by narrowing the mouth of my work, thereby enhancing the value of art. This is to leave beautiful forms and practical values as significant aesthetic elements. And yet, this "metaphoric receptacle" shape has been an obstacle for an artwork's appreciation and value in the art market. But I think that traditional ceramic shape is why it has been loved for a long time passed down through generations for all in concert with the public's aesthetic standard. My work seeks the arts to be based on the spirit and heritage of crafts.



What fascinates me every time I see one of your works up close are the intricate and accurate carvings. I have the feeling that you are not carving in leather-hard clay, but in a clay in an already much drier state.

I usually use fine particles of ironless clay that is shaped by wheel throwing. Each basic form is normally dried for about three months. The surface is akin to that of sandstone. It has to be carved initially like a drawing, then scraped out, and lastly rubbed, anticipating its state and depth as well as its completed appearance. I think I have become able to more gradually and delicately create diverse patterns since I have skilfully mastered how to use a variety of tools and apply them to each carving process. I consistently study new patterns and designs.

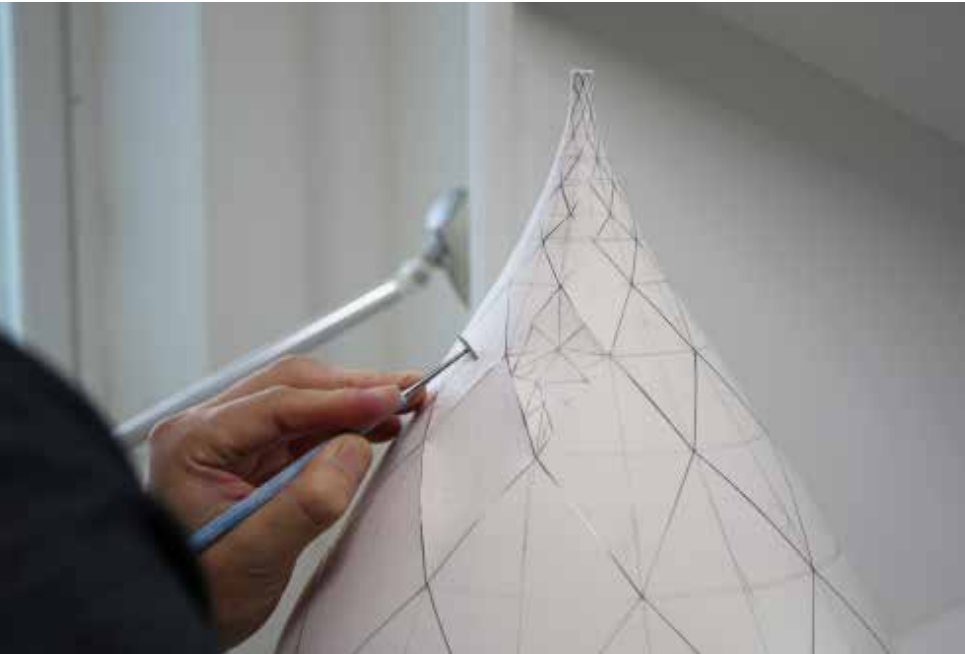
The carving patterns change depending on the brightness or darkness of the daylight. We are of course extremely curious how you come up with the surface patterns which, in my eyes, are full of energy.

As my works are carved after naturally drawing some patterns, these patterns have no fixed design. A wide range of bright and dark tones arises when light is refracted and reaches mutually differ-





ent spaces as if each thing in nature we are aware of can be defined by one colour. The Philosopher Jo Yo-han (1926-2002, Korea) said that “Koreans’ formative beauty was rooted in Taoism and Buddhism’s view of life, and that the ideal was to discover the beauty in nature with nature as its matrix.” I think my work in a metaphorical and serene form between the splendid and sophisticated technology of China and the neat and organized formative beauty of Japan is what I can make because I am such a Korean. You may see the moon in my work, and some others may find different natural aspects they infer in the same piece.



Can you please guide us through the technical process of creating your works?

A. Material/Clay

I get clay from a factory. This clay has the same ingredients as porcelain slip primarily used for plaster casting. After thinly slicing this clay at my studio and drying it, I put it in water and remove any iron content that might remain. This naturally dried clay is blended with Zircon. The mixture ratio of Zircon is between 5% and 11%, which can be adjusted in accordance with size and pattern.

B. Modelling: Wheel throwing

A basic form which is less than 40 cm in height can be wheel thrown at one time but a basic form which is more than 40 cm in height can be wheel thrown twice in the manner of making a moon jar that forges the upper and bottom parts independently and then joins them.

C. Drying

The vessels completed are naturally dried indoors for about three months. A long time is required for drying because the walls of my pieces are relatively thick. The surface is evenly arranged before carving.

D. Carving

The process of carving is usually carried out five or seven times. I carve patterns while turning the vessel and supporting it with a sponge to prevent it from shattering or to lessen the impact. A rough sketch is first drawn and then the location of the entire pattern is decided. The first round of carving adds a little more depth. After starting carving in earnest, I change my position every few hours, not staying in one place.

E. Bisque firing

The heat is gradually turned up to 950°C over 36 hours in consideration of the wall’s thickness and entrance. Vessels stay in the kiln for about two days even after firing.

F. Glazing

I spray the glaze mixture onto the form several times to ensure consistency over the form. The mixture soaks into the piece and





then I spend two to three days removing the excess glaze from the formations of the carvings on the piece so the thickness of the glaze is the same throughout the piece.

G. Second firing

After the glazing and cleaning of my artwork, one piece is put into the kiln and four burners are lit. The temperature is raised to 170°C and during this time I control the soot from the gas by using the oxygen inlets. The gas pressure is increased until 950°C is reached. Now, the oxygen valves are fully opened and the glazed pieces oxidize and have a transparent bluish hue to them. The temperature is gradually raised to 1260°C and at this point the burners are turned off. During the firing process the pieces will shrink about 25%. The pieces will remain inside the kiln for about three days. This entire process allows for about a 75% success rate for my artwork.

I guess patience must be one of your strengths. How long do you carve on a work like this and what kind of tools do you use? You know, years ago, when I first saw a picture of you carving away on a piece, I was under the impression you were using a dentist's drill....

I was fond of making or observing something as a child, sitting in one place for a long time. This disposition seems to have naturally been the foundation for my process and accomplishment. I became aware that dental instruments are apt for my work as they are so precise. I have mainly been using a bar, a very keen dental instrument that looks like a needle after putting it in a pin vice.

What are your plans and wishes for the future?

I have happily been an artist for the last 10 years. My close relationship with those who have cheered me on enabled me to attain this. I consider this the greatest blessing. I want to continue my work more sincerely and strenuously in the next 10 years.

Lee Jong Min

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Evelyne Schoenmann's
next interview partner is
Ross de Wayne, USA/Germany.

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist,
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