

## Two Masters of Black Ceramics and Silver Object

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**“The worship of beauty takes precedence, dangerously, over morality, facts, usefulness, sense, and, as far as possible, reality itself.”<sup>1</sup>**

### 1. Master’s ‘Work’ (作業)

Both black ceramics and silver object are classified as craft. While such a classification has lost its meaning in this age and time, I believe that the labels of ‘ceramist’ and ‘metalsmith’ serve Kim Syyoung and William Lee, respectively, better than the generic term ‘artist’. For the labels, I insist, not only show less influence from the Western modernism that calls everyone ‘artists’ but also reflect our tradition in craft that denotes a connotation of ‘artisan’ or ‘meister’.

Craft is essentially a labor-intensive work that penetrates the essence of the material. “The worship of beauty”, quoted above, is merely what follows. Most of the terms related to craft or art come from borrowed words from Chinese or follow Japanese orthography based on Chinese letters. For example, let us take a look at the word 作業 which is directly connected to the idea of craftsmanship.

If we are to directly translate the Chinese word 作業 into Korean, we could perhaps say ‘to make things’; there are, of course, deeper and wider connotations to the nuance of this word. The letter 業 might as well be translated to ‘life’ itself given its uses in Chinese language. And indeed, the most common association that Korean speakers have with the word 業 would be ‘work’. Here, ‘work’ signifies a sense of labor that employs both our body and our mind. A ‘labor of body and mind’, then, connects to our ‘occupation’ and the act of ‘making a living’. To act on ‘業’, therefore, marks the *beginning* of our ‘life’ and is inevitably connected to the notions of ‘origin, basis, or beginning’, of which societal implications bear resemblance to

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<sup>1</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *The Critic as Artist*. New York: David Zwirner Books, 2019, p. 13.

religion or ethics. As we see in examples of ‘業報’ (roughly, Karma) or ‘因果應報’ (roughly, a just punishment or recompense), ‘業’ constitutes a sense of the struggle between right and wrong, and good and bad.

This etymological divergence is to emphasize how Kim Syyoung and William Lee take the actions and thoughts of craft as ‘work’ (and hence ‘labor’) before declaring any occupational or vocational connection to being ‘artists’. That is to say, these two *masters* assert their ‘occupation’ not through obtaining a degree, for example, but by committing to their ‘job’ and by ‘making a living’ for themselves and their families. Simplified, not only is the confidence of these two professional craftspeople imbued into the word of ‘作業’, but also the consciously chosen ‘vividness’ of both anguish and euphoria as craftspeople that equate ‘業報’ (karma) eventually become their ‘works’. While such properties of their artistic endeavor lead to the production of works that belong to a wholly artistic realm, it is a shame that ‘reality’, with its capitalistic irony, prioritizes ‘result’ over ‘process’ and hence values ‘marketability’ of the work. That is to say that the problem of aesthetic judgment and evaluation of the artistic commitment to their ‘works’ is not solely in the hands of the artists but at the mercy of the audience.

## **2. Kim Syyoung’s Black Ceramics**

Recently, craft, too, pursues the abstract that we find in monochrome painting following its resurgence. More specifically, as the ‘moon jar’ located itself as the iconic aesthetic *objet* that represents South Korea, craft began to exhibit a tendency to represent the abstract in connection to its tradition. With such a tendency, craft was distanced from its inherent function and started pursuing concepts of painting and sculpture (what we consider to be the two mainstream genres of art), aesthetics, and decorativeness, eventually leading to the point where we are comfortable calling these two masters ‘artists’.

It is my contention that craft’s function remains the same despite the change in the epoch, and that its everyday-life-ness must be discussed along with its beauty. In other words, one does not need a painting on a wall to be able to sustain one’s life, but a plate is a necessary condition for one to sustain a human life. Some might dismiss my view on the basis that craft, too, is

gratuitous for the sustenance of life, but the point that I am raising here is that craft's inherent functions are increasingly blurred these days.

The aesthetic of '李朝' white porcelain (李朝 is an archaic term for Joseon), made popular again by the recent resurgence of the monochrome painting, can be said to be the extension of our tradition that is unfortunately trapped within the Confucian ethics and its perceptive limits. The representation of the tradition should be a kind of representation that, transcending beyond mere mimesis, steps into the realm of 'transformation' that carries its *zeitgeist*. The criteria with which we assess craft's functionality and beauty should, so I argue, pertain to that realm of 'transformation'.

Kim Syyoung's black ceramics works, too, are not free from the aesthetic of monochrome painting, as they employ a black monochrome<sup>2</sup>. However, Kim Syyoung's ceramics works aim at a transformation as a sculptural lump of volume and mass without paying respect to the functionality of a 'jar' while maintaining the black tone. How are we to make of this unique transformation? A postmodern *zeitgeist*? Or an aberration that defies the monotony of work process and form? Or a dangerous worship of beauty as Oscar Wilde explains? In any event, Kim Syyoung's transformation is scintillating. It draws attention to not only her next project but also to the configuration of black monochrome.

### **3. Silver object by William Lee**

The ingredient for the 'moon jar' is a 'silver plate'. By forging a flat, literal silver plate, the metalsmith crafts a jar. The color and form of the jar resemble the moon, thus giving it its name. Silver is white. This is why we sometimes call it '白銀' (literally 'white silver'). Silver is softer than other metals which makes it an excellent ingredient for forging. And because of its surface that reflects most of the light, it shines the brightest among metal. Such properties have put silver on a pedestal in both the East and the West. Its shiny surface, moreover, has associated silver with the Moon, thus recurring in symbols or myths related to it. The value of the material has been recognized from as early as ancient times when plates for religious rituals or upper-

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<sup>2</sup> I am speaking of my argument from elsewhere that *Black Painting* by Robert Rauschenberg is not unrelated to the monochrome paintings of Japan and Korea. Kim Syyoung's Black Ceramic works pertain to this argument.

class cutlery preferred silver as its ‘fancy’ ingredient. Europeans, in particular the 16<sup>th</sup>-century England, have put so much value on well-crafted Silver Object that they are considered antique now. For William Lee whose critical acclaim began in England and not his native Korea, such history can be particularly meaningful.

Silver (銀) was more valuable than gold (金) at times. I believe that’s why we call banks ‘銀行’ and not ‘金行’. The etymology of the Chinese word for bank (銀行) comes from the time of the silver standard. There can be many ingredients to craft a ‘jar’. For example, even painting, photography, or videography can be used, in this age of abstract art, to create an image of a jar as efficiently as metal. However, as the symbol and value of silver suggest, one can argue that William Lee has taken the initiative on a pricey y

et valuable material to start his main game more luxuriously.

William Lee says to have been inspired by the natural, organic phenomena such as “flowing, melting, or freezing”. The manifestation of such inspiration resembles, both formally and stylistically, the representations of textures appearing on the surface of the ‘moon jar’. While it is evident that the metalsmith must have been immersed with both his body and mind during the restless hammering of the plate, the texture that appears on the surface is a product of accident that takes place in the random strikes with varying degrees of strength. However, it is the randomness and the abstraction of the part of the texture (and the entire surface that is a series of such textures) that makes the audience want to feel and touch the ‘jar’. In addition, our visual perception will associate the surface with the sentiment of ‘flowing’ that, in turn, creates a reproduction of one’s life that transcends spatiotemporal boundaries and leads our imagination.

In this sense, the appeal of ‘moon jar’ is twofold. One, the past-oriented sentiment that the mixture of ‘Moon’ and ‘jar’ creates, and two, the sentiment of contemporary art related to abstraction. It is my contention that such characteristics of the ‘moon jar’ will eventually converge and create discourses related to the formal and aesthetic discussion of the monochrome painting. This is also noticeable in the retro taste of the contemporary art scene that focuses on monochrome painting. At the same time, can we imagine William Lee without silver as his main material and main element for the ‘transformation’ as I discussed earlier?

I see the project of this exhibition as a convergence of two master craftspeople whose colors of ‘black and white’ are contrasted. While they might use different materials, the monochrome

aesthetic that these materials emanate shows a dialectic harmony between them. The audience will surely feel the subtle yet certain attraction of the works that these two masters pronounce.