

EXPANSION OF MEDIA AND ACTS OF TRANSLATION

The artists discussed in Chapter 12 – Yeesoonyung (b. 1963), Meekyoung Shin (b. 1967) and Sekyung Lee (b. 1973) – have been breaking new ground in women's art through their efforts to uncover different materials, their expansions of media and their experiments with technique and style. While their explorations of media and style blur the boundaries of past/present, East/West and art/craft, their work ultimately boils down to acts of translation that intervene in classical traditions, patriarchal history and authentic culture. Yeesoonyung and Shin focus their energies on creative translations based on intricate craftsmanship applied to unexpected materials, such as pottery shards and soap, respectively, and Lee continues this ideology of translation by imbuing human hair with aesthetic value – a form of bodily 'ready-made'. As they broaden the scope of visual language and aesthetic codes with their development of translation media and styles, existing systems of representation are reorganized and women's art becomes more diverse.

The three artists' translation projects involve creating new works of art with 'non-artistic' ready-made materials taken from everyday life. Applying unorthodox, unconventional, never-before-seen ideas, they have broadened the horizons of perception and afforded new aesthetic experiences with craft-like techniques that carry associations with the female gender. Additionally, their techniques of borrowing and replication across different historical and regional contexts raise a new awareness of the meaning of cultural transmission, reception, difference and convergence. Their translation work does not signify a direct translating of dominant Western culture or authoritative classical tradition; in their case it is a strategic liberal translation that creates new art in the cracks between assimilation and differentiation, where Western/non-Western and past/present cultures coexist and compete. They do not create passive translations that follow the same mechanical methods or one-sidedly reflect the influence of one specific cultural sphere. Their aim is an active approach that reveals cultural differences as they impinge upon, twist and subvert traditions and authority. Instead of assimilating the strange into the familiar, they adopt a heterogenization strategy that makes the strange appear even stranger. By emphasizing translation not simply as an interpreting act but as a political one, they practice an ethics of translation rooted in difference.

YEESOOKYUNG: TRANSLATIONAL IMAGINATION

Yeesoonyung has broadened her artistic spectrum by combining genres of drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, video and performance and working in traditional Korean areas ranging from crafts to music and dance. Since the early 1990s, she has created a sense of wonder – heterogeneous, hybrid and unfamiliar – through her experimentation with different media. In the process, she has earned the reputation of a problematic artist not only within Korea but around the world.

Using an assemblage approach, Yeesoonyung has been creating odd and magical objects from the beginning of her career. For her first solo exhibition 'Getting Married to Myself' at Indeco Gallery, Seoul and subsequently at K Gallery, Tokyo in 1992, she presented work that alluded with cynical humour to the fantasies and agonies of women, including a portrait photograph showing herself made up as both the bride and groom, as well as *Death of High-Heels*, a pair of shoes that have a beautiful floral pattern but cannot be worn because their laces are missing. She startled viewers further with her risky, transgressive work at the 1997 solo exhibition 'Domestic Taylor Shop' at Kumho Museum of Art, Seoul by presenting, among other works, *Nail Flower* (1996), in which she placed a lotus flower made from fingernail clippings into a wine glass that she had filled with urine, and *Snow White Revision* (1995), where she adorned a princess's tiara with jewels and pink bubblegum on the inside so it resembled a vagina. An archival photograph of her 1998 performance, *Blind Minnie Mouse*, shows the artist sitting not in the gallery but on a toilet,

holding a Minnie Mouse doll with its eye buttons removed. In contrast, she drew large eyes on her own face. The work equates the subordinate otherness of Minnie Mouse (a secondary character regarded as 'Mickey's girlfriend', and rendered blind here to boot) with the status of peripheral female artists whose work has been underappreciated in a male-dominated art world. The Yeesoonyung of this period was a brash yet playful young feminist decrying the patriarchal oppression inflicted on women.

Since the 2000s, her work has transformed as she shifted away from resistance and anger against society and more in the direction towards inward self-reflection. Her 'Daily Drawing' series, which she began in 2004, was a precursor to her later extensive two-dimensional work of a meditative, self-disciplining character. She produced finely detailed brush drawings as part of her daily routine, with images showing various women crying and suffering. The drawings evoke associations with original sin and karmic retribution against women. As a continuation of this, she presented the organic 'Breeding Drawing' series (2005–), in which she applied a two-handed drawing technique to show the symmetrical proliferation of women's faces and limbs, as well as the two series 'Flame' (2005–) and 'Flame Variation' (2012–), which are a synthesis of her previous daily drawings. In the latter, she fills the canvas with female 'others' (the Virgin Mary, witches, clowns, Medusa, a skull) together with the tears they shed and the flames that summon their souls, eventually leading to self-repeating and self-propagating painterly chaos.

Both series emanate therapeutic, mystical allusions thanks to their use of cinnabar, a material applied in the past to portray amulets and Buddha images. The deep red cinnabar represents the bloody tears of regret and the energy of revitalization. The 'Flame' drawings were produced through a form of mental dictation along the same lines as the Surrealists' automatic drawings, but they are also exquisitely detailed and are the result of intense manual labour. By burying herself in her canvas and applying a schismatic, delusional female writing conducted at conscious and unconscious levels, she confronts women's structurally conditioned reality and achieves an awakening of penitence and healing that allows her to express the

Yeesoonyung
Flame Variation 1-1, 2012
pigment on silk
138 × 195 cm (54 3/8 × 76 3/4 in)



hidden true self. The acrylic series 'Past Life Regression Painting' (2014–) is both a variation on 'Flame' and a fantastical work of imagination in which the artist portrays herself in past lives. Adopting the motif of previous lives relived with the help of a hypnotherapist, she shows herself transformed into a baby deer in a paradise of pink rose petals, a spectre in the deep ocean, a guru in the forest, a samurai and a fir tree. Through this regressive self-discovery, she experiences déjà vu between life and death, this world and the next, heaven and hell.

Another strand in Yeesoookyung's body of work is her 'Translated Vase' series (2002–), which has become a 'brand' of sorts for the artist. Using adhesive to piece together shards of pottery that was shattered by its creators as 'failed work', she produces complete creations through the labour-intensive approach of plating the cracks with gold (both 'crack' and 'gold' are referred to by the Korean word *geum*). She conceptualized this process as one that modernizes ceramic traditions through an act of translation: deconstructed ceramics are reintegrated using methods of assemblage or montage. Though composed of fragments, one can imagine the whole. The translation idea was inspired by an experience in 2001, when the artist exhibited twelve works of porcelain that she had commissioned from local potters in the Italian ceramic production hub of Albisola Superiore. The potters there were strangers to East Asian pottery, and she witnessed the heterogeneity and transmutability that arose from cultural difference and variation in interpretations. Through a commissioned project that raised awareness of the meaning of translation, she came to artistically export Korean culture – an act of inversion that is notable for the fact that the ones importing foreign culture and going through a translation process were not Koreans but Western Europeans.

She attracted global attention at the 6th Gwangju Biennale in 2006 with her 'translated' ceramics. As with her 'Flame' series, she once again immersed herself in a project with a schismatic, delusional approach. This is a matter of completing the work as the hands and body dictate, ahead of any sort of ideas or planning of forms. The artist's physical sense decides the shapes, and the shapes evolve in a self-proliferating way. As though infusing life into the mineral with her body temperature and breath, she creates new organisms out of dismantled fragments. Through the physical act of translation, the pottery becomes a strange hybrid that seems to live and move – a realm of mutational leaps that has only intensified in her post-2010 work, which makes use not only of white porcelain and celadon but also shards of North Korean and European ceramics.

Around 2006, the artist shifted her focus to religious themes, emphasizing the metonymic meaning of translation in her sculpture series 'The Very Best Statue' (2006–) along with the painting series entitled 'Portable Temple' (2008–). The former seems to denounce the way the institutionalization of religion has damaged faith, through an iconoclastic artistic act of fragmenting the body parts of sacred figures (Confucius, Laozi, the Virgin Mary, Jesus, Buddha), including the eyes, nose, mouth and limbs, and then reassembling them based on the preferences indicated in a survey of local residents. As with the assembling of shards in her translated ceramics, the reconstructed hybrid images have re-emerged as the 'very best statues'. 'Portable Temple' is, as its title indicates, a movable temple – a six-part folding screen with detailed images produced using the *seokchae* (stone powder pigment) technique, with the help of an expert. There are various images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, including Amitabha Buddha, Medicine Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva and Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. Since the colours and techniques are rooted in Goryeo-era Buddha images, the results may appear familiar at first glance – but a closer look shows that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are seated with their backs turned. Not only do the images seem unfamiliar with their imaginative representation of sacred figures seen from behind, but the very idea of them being shown from the back comes across as startling.

After 2010, the artist began incorporating Korean traditional music as a new subject matter and performance genre, staging purificational performances



left:
Yeesoookyung
Translated Vase 2018 TVG 3,
2018
ceramic shards, epoxy resin
and 24-carat gold leaf
137 × 91 × 96 cm
(54 × 35 7/8 × 37 3/4 in)



right:
Yeesoookyung
Translated Vase 2019 TVCW 1,
2019
ceramic shards, epoxy resin
and 24-carat gold leaf
107 × 85 × 71 cm
(42 1/8 × 33 1/2 × 28 in)

like a manifestation of spirituality. At the solo exhibition 'Jung Marie's Jeongga, Yeesoookyung's Devotion' at ARKO Art Center, Seoul in 2010, she presented *Norae – While Our Tryst Has Been Delayed*, a meditative, healing performance and installation. Dedicated to the *jeongga*, a heavenly *norae* (song) that awakens the soul, and the singer Jung Marie, the piece consisted of two parts; Jung's surreal performance took place on a funnel-shaped stage built in the centre's first floor,¹ while around 180 of Yeesoookyung's 'Daily Drawing' works were exhibited on the second floor. The drawings were acoustic images in a sense, recording the inspiration the artist felt as she listened to various forms of religious music, such as *jeongga*, *beompae* (Korean Buddhist chants) and Gregorian chants. Such is the secretive and metaphorical nature of these images, they can be seen as being occult and at the same time religious. The musical sounds flowed through the setting alongside the drawings, performing a work by Jung that adapted 'Stabat Mater' (a Catholic hymn about the suffering of Mary) into the *jeongga* style. As the traditional Korean *jeongga* merged with the Western hymn, evincing symptoms of heterogeneity, complexity and hybridity, the experience heightened the sense of something both peaceful and exhilarating.

Since 2018, the artist has been creating 'Moonlight Crown', a masterful series fusing and condensing her whole imagination in terms of medium, materials, technique, style and theme. In her notes, she explains, 'For a long time, I thought of crowns as substitutes for the haloes depicted over the heads of the Buddha, Jesus and the saints'. As this comment shows, she imagines the crown as an earthly descent of divinity and as the grasping, power-seeking desires of those who have lost their halo. The crown represents opulence and glory – yet to the artist, it is an ill-fated, profane symbol, crushed by the weight of power and prestige and tainted by the tears of

historical hardship. She has imagined them to be 'so big that no one could ever wear them on their head, like an object that grows itself and stands facing to me and appeals for a new meaning and name'.²

Yeesookyung bedecks her crowns with various shiny, ornamental materials, including crystal, glass and mirrors. A closer look, however, shows them to be enormous material masses intertwined with tiny metal sculptures depicting angels, girls' faces, praying hands, limbs, plants and animals that have reappeared from her 'Daily Drawing' and 'Flame' series. Radiating exaggerated energy with their maximalist clashing aesthetic and their drive towards heterogeneity and hybridity, the crowns are so resplendent as to seem sad, so painstaking as to seem empty. As though reflecting the suppressed female libido, the 'Moonlight Crown' expresses a dual excitement at the boundary between desire and despair, fascination and terror. The brash feminism of the artist's early work seems to come back to life. The series represents the undercurrents running through Yeesookyung's body of work: the coexistence and duality of optimism/pessimism and hope/despair, and in particular multiple, fragmented feminine images. In a text posted on the wall of her 1997 solo exhibition 'Domestic Taylor Shop', the artist declared, 'I live with multiple "me's"... I am already many "you's"'. As expressed by this declaration, she invents a new, mythic feminine image of indefinable origin, one that has never been seen or spoken of before, in terms of her own multivocal feminine categories that neutralize the binary oppositions of the 'good girl' and 'bad girl' (or the characters of Kongji and Patji in a Korean folk tale similar to *Cinderella*). In this context, the 'Moonlight Crown' can be described as a metaphorical allegory encapsulating the feminism of Yeesookyung.

below:
Yeesookyung
Guseul Halmang from the
series 'Moonlight Crown', 2021
glass buoy, brass, iron, 24-carat
gold leaf, wood, 3D-printed
sculpture, pearl, glass and
mother-of-pearl
134.7 × 56.4 × 41.9 cm
(53 × 22 ¼ × 16 ½ in)

opposite page:
Yeesookyung
'Moonlight Crowns' exhibition,
2021
installation view, Art Sonje
Center, Seoul

