

May Each Gem and Shard Be Imbued with Affection: An Art of Transcendence Woven with Female Narratives

Kang, Eunju

Women wearing wide, billowing skirts line up and perform a dance in ensemble. Their hair, adorned with elaborate jewelry, rise up like the spires of temples or the shapes of flames, below which faces of young girls, innocent and youthful, sit as if in prayer. They are Princess Bari, Guseul Halmang, Tara (a female bodhisattva in Tibetan Buddhism), and at the same time, The Virgin Mary.

In her 2021 exhibition *Moonlight Crowns*, the artist Yeesoookyung selected these women from both Eastern and Western religious and mythological narratives and depicted them as a sort of deities, arranging them to present a scene where they cluster in solidarity. A year later, in her twenty-ninth solo exhibition, she named them ‘*Intimate Sisters*.’ Here, the term ‘intimate’ conveys a feminine attitude of affection and ‘sisters’ implies solidarity among women.

While Yeesoookyung is well-known for her *Translated Vase* series (2002-present) (Fig. 1, Fig. 2), her work has long delved into themes of women’s lives and identities. In her first solo exhibition, *Getting Married to Myself*, in 1992, she portrayed real-world desires and struggles of women in a cynical manner through a display of photographs in which she played both bride and groom (Fig. 3, Fig. 4), and glamorous high heels that cannot be worn due to broken straps (Fig. 5).

Yeesookyung belongs to the generation of Korean artists influenced by the extensive influx of Western feminism beginning in 1988. Unlike the first generation of feminist artists in Korea who emerged within the Minjung Art Movement of the 1980s, she embraced feminist art through a more theoretical approach and a diverse range of themes. As she spent her twenties and thirties in the 1990s, her experiences of marriage, childbirth, and parenting brought her to confront the real-world challenges that women face as well as the complexities of her identity as an artist. In her efforts to reconcile these aspects, she naturally wove women’s narratives into her work.

In Vases and Crowns, and All Objects, Lies History and Meaning

According to the artist, the *Moonlight Crown* series (Fig. 6) is described as “works where the crowns have become bodies themselves, too large and heavy to ever be worn on the head.” Rather than placing crowns, symbols of power, atop heads, she uses them as pedestals from which fragments of all kinds of objects sprout up like plants. As a result, the crowns embody the female figure, as well as the image of a deity. Their surfaces are covered with iron, bronze, glass, mother-of-pearl, gemstones, and mirrors. Also visible are angels, praying hands, crosses, dragons, tigers, and Baroque-style botanical patterns.

These fragments are primarily metal ornament pieces used in jewelry that bear traces of old beliefs but are now abandoned and secularized, having lost their original place. They hold a similar meaning to the ceramic shards used in the *Translated Vase* series, which come from ceramic pottery that have been destroyed by master potters because they were deemed imperfect. The artist gathers these discarded objects and shards to create new forms, new organisms. Most of these artworks bloom into shapes rounded at the center and are densely packed with objects, which can be viewed as a symbol of female fertility and abundance, comparable to the Venus of Willendorf or Rubens' Three Graces.

Reflecting on the title, the moon represents a feminine space that shines serenely in the darkness, which stands in contrast with the masculine sun that illuminates and reveals all things. It is also a mystical presence that embraces darkness in its shadows and harbors infinite imagination since the beginning of time. Moonlight, then, functions in Yeessookyung's artworks as an energy that allows objects to transcend their past wounds and restore their sacredness, enabling them to shine once more. This very energy serves to resurrect a shattered ceramic pot into a complete vase once more, and empower a forsaken angel to rise above the authority of the crown, reclaiming its spirituality.

Yeessookyung's creations are predominantly crafted through a meticulous process of expertly controlling and delicately shaping a variety of materials. Her emphasis on craft over traditional sculpture and her technique of weaving together precious gemstones from both the East and West with broken and discarded objects reveals her intent to transcend not only the traditional hierarchies of art but also prejudices of the typical world, while demonstrating her determination to redeem and revive all things beautifully.

Classics of Korean Female Narratives: Princess Bari and Guseul Halmang

Presiding over all of this is the face of Princess Bari. The artist frequently depicts female figures bearing faces of young girls, each of whom can be interpreted as portrayals of Bari, the heroine of the eponymous Korean folktale. Having freed themselves from the grime and struggles of the secular world, they come to signify the idea of purification. Ultimately, through this journey of purification, they become spiritual beings.

Around 2003, in an effort to awaken her senses, Yeesoookyung began creating Buddhist drawings using cinnabar, which led her to explore religious and mythological themes. Among these, the Tale of Bari stands out as one of the artist's longest-standing subjects, first addressed in her 2005 series *Breeding Drawing* (Fig. 7) and later more explicitly in her 3D printing work *All Asleep* in 2015 (Fig. 8, Fig. 9). As the story goes, Bari, abandoned by her parents for being a daughter, embarks on a journey to the underworld to find the water of life in order to save them. After enduring numerous trials, she succeeds in reviving her parents and chooses the fate of becoming a *mudang* (shaman), who bridges the realms of the living and the dead, human and divine, thereby becoming the ancestor of all shamans in Korea. The folktale is regarded as a critique of the patriarchal societal structure and the Confucian ideology of *nam-jon-yeo-bi* (male superiority), illustrated through the life of Bari, who was oppressed simply for being a woman.

Likewise, Guseul Halmang, featured in *Moonlight Crown_Guseul Halmang* (2021) (Fig. 10, Fig. 11), stands as a prominent figure in Korean female mythology. A young girl, abandoned by her parents, encounters a boatman and drifts to Jeju Island, where she becomes a *haenyeo* (female diver). With her exceptional prowess, she harvests abalones and pearls and presents them to the king, receiving multicolored beads in return. Thereafter, she became known as Guseul Halmang (Bead Grandmother) and is still regarded today as the indigenous guardian deity of Jeju, symbolizing fertility and abundance, and bestowing blessings upon her descendants. While her narrative parallels that of Princess Bari, Guseul Halmang distinguishes herself by actively shaping her own destiny, independent of fate. This legend, which reflects the aspirations of Jeju's *haenyeo* who led arduous lives, is reimaged by the artist using old glass buoys and a 3D-printed head of Bari.

Yeesookyung frequently incorporates the imagery of hands in her oeuvre, drawing inspiration from Tara, the Tibetan female bodhisattva. Tara's hands, with eyes on their palms,

enables her to perceive all human suffering, safeguarding the lives of all beings and guiding them toward enlightenment. In *Polaris*(2012) (Fig. 12), the delicate hands of young girls are portrayed in gestures of embrace and prayer, nurturing both humans and animals. Meanwhile, the women adorned with tiger skins in *Moonlight Crown_Intimate Sisters* (2021) (Fig. 13) trace their origins to the tiger tribe from the Myth of Dangun. The women of the tiger tribe, who were overlooked by Dangun, establish their own kingdom and flourish in infinite proliferation through their solidarity, cooperation, and mutual care among themselves. The assembly of girls, rising by leaning on each other's shoulders and adorned with a myriad of women's breasts embodying the imagery of a powerful maternal deity, epitomizes the formidable strength of female solidarity.

Yeesookyung's recurrent depiction of heroines from classic female narratives—Princess Bari, Guseul Halmang, Tara, and the women of the tiger tribe—serves not only to illuminate the discrimination and challenges women still face in contemporary society but also to celebrate their strength, resilience, and healing powers in overcoming such adversities.

Affectionate Solidarity: Spirituality Beyond Healing

Yeesookyung has often been noted for conveying the meaning of 'healing', through her method of filling the *geum*(cracks) in broken ceramics with *geum*(gold). Her recent work on the *Moonlight Crown* series, however, appears to have transcended the concept of 'healing,' reaching a higher realm of spirituality.

The artist recalls that while working on the series, she deeply felt that "spirituality exists equally in all of us." She suggests that all beings are interconnected, and therefore, inherently complete. The *Moonlight Crown* series communicates a profound belief that encourages us to let go of the fears and anxieties of reality, as "we are already complete beings, and our bodies are sacred temples, our spirits the resplendent crowns themselves."

The artistic process whereby broken objects intertwine and rely on each other to form a complete shape embodies a sense of mutual affection or tenderness that seeks reconciliation over conflict, and coexistence over exclusion. Yeesookyung's artistic world, which harmonizes the masculine and feminine, traverses Eastern and Western cultures, and bridges the realms of art and

craft, encapsulates a feminist worldview that cherishes the intrinsic value of all humanity and all things.

About the Artist

Yeesookyung was born in Seoul in 1963. She received her BFA and MFA in painting from Seoul National University, Korea. She began to gain recognition with her first solo exhibition, *Getting Married with Myself*, which was held in Seoul and Tokyo in 1992. She participated in numerous feminist art group exhibitions, such as *Women and Empty Scene* (1992) and *99 Feminist Art Festival – Patji's on Parade* (1999). Gaining international acclaim with her *Translated Vase* series first introduced in 2001, she expanded the themes of her sculptural work with the *Moonlight Crown* series since 2017. Her unique artistic vision is also showcased in the *Daily Drawing* series, cinnabar drawings created to train both body and mind, and the self-replicating *Rose Painting* series. Yeesookyung's work has been featured in major international exhibitions, including the 6th Gwangju Biennale (2006) and the 57th Venice Biennale (2017). She has held solo exhibitions at renowned institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei (2015), Museo di Capodimonte in Naples (2019), and Musée Cernuschi in Paris (2023). Her notable solo exhibitions in Korea include *Jung Marie's Jeongga, Yeesookyung's Devotion* (2010, Arko Art Center), *When I Become You* (2015, Daegu Art Museum), and *Moonlight Crowns* (2021, Art Sonje Center). Her works are included in the major art collections worldwide, such as the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul Museum of Art, Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Korea; Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in the United States; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in Japan; The British Museum and Saatchi Gallery in London; and M+ Museum in Hong Kong.

Currently, Yeesookyung is preparing to feature her artworks in the Asian Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition at Juming Museum in Taiwan this fall, and a ceramics exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, scheduled for the first half of 2025.

Kang, Eunju (1975~)

Art Historian

Lecturer at Ewha Womans University, Sungshin Women's University, and the Korea National University of Cultural Heritage

Ph.D. in Art History from Ewha Womans University

Head of Exhibition Team at the Cheongju Craft Biennale

Curator at Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation

Curatorial Researcher at Ewha Womans University Museum

Featured Artworks



Fig. 1 Yeesookyung, *Translated Vase TVBGKSHW 1*, 2023, ceramic shards, epoxy, 24K gold leaf, 196x104x111 cm

Photo: Yang Ian Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 2 Yeesookyung, *Translated Vase TVBGKSHW 1*, 2023, ceramic shards, epoxy, 24K gold leaf, 196x104x111 cm (detail)

Photo: Yang Ian Courtesy of the artist

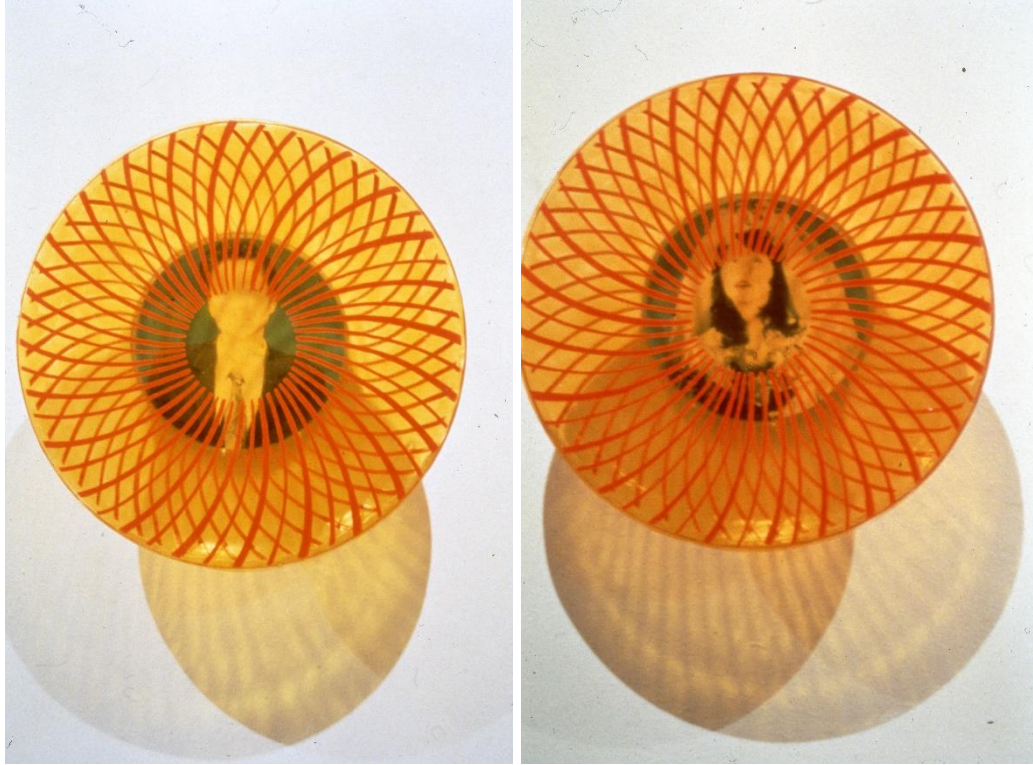


Fig. 3 Yeesookyung, *Getting Married to Myself*, 1993, Mixed media, 25 x 25 x 12 cm (each)

Fig. 4 Yeesookyung, *Getting Married to Myself*, 1993, Mixed media, 25 x 25 x 12 cm (each)



Fig. 5 Yeesookyung, *The Death of High-Heels*, 1993, Acrylic on high heels' sole, 20 x 12 x 7 cm (each)



Fig. 6 Installation view. *Moonlight Crowns*, Art Sonje Center, Seoul, Korea

Courtesy of the artist and Art Sonje Center, Seoul, Korea

Photo: Yang Ian ©Yeesookyung



Fig. 7 Yeesookyung, *Breeding Drawing 11*, 2005, cinnabar on Korean paper, 100 x 100 cm



Fig. 8 Installation view, *All Asleep, When I Become You*, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu, Korea, 2015, photo by Keith Park



Fig. 9 Installation view, *All Asleep, When I Become You*, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu, Korea, 2015, photo by Keith Park (detail)



Fig. 10 Yeesookyung, *Moonlight Crown_Guseul Halmang*, 2021, Glass buoy, brass, iron, 24K gold leaf, wood, 3D printed sculpture, pearl, glass, mother-of-pearl, 134.7 x 56.4 x 41.9 cm



Fig. 11 Yeesookyung, *Moonlight Crown_Guseul Halmang*, 2021, Glass buoy, brass, iron, 24K gold leaf, wood, 3D printed sculpture, pearl, glass, mother-of-pearl, 134.7 x 56.4 x 41.9 cm (detail)



Fig. 12 Yeesookyung, *Polaris*, 2012, 3D modeling, 3D printing, Dimensions variable

Photo: Courtesy of MMCA



Fig.13 Yeesookyung, *Moonlight Crown_Intimate Sisters_East Peak*, 2021, brass, epoxy, iron, resin, 114x73x74 cm

Photo: Yang Ian Courtesy of the artist