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Throwing Pots, Viewing Pots, Using Pots: On Young-Jae Lee's Bowl and Vase Series

A Thousand and One Bowls

Young-Jae Lee has thrown many hundreds of bowls. Recently these have been bowls that open out restrainingly, some like a calyx, others in a funnel shape. Each is an entity in its own right. Each obtains its shape in several rotations of the wheel, not only in the acquisition of form through widening and rounding, but also in the attainment of volume. A bowl draws its strength, its presence, from volume. Young-Jae Lee concentrates on the inside of a bowl while pulling the body, thereby preparing the outside form. Concentrating solely on the outside would mean focusing on contour, giving preference to line over space. Each instance of drawing up the sides determines the form of the upper part of the bowl. Lastly, Young-Jae Lee gives final accentuation to the curvature of the bowl's lip, thereby shaping the interior form—the depth, width, and height of the bowl. The lip of the bowl is where interior and exterior form, volume and contour, meet. The exterior form must fulfill the specifications of the interior form; it has to encompass the volume and transfix the viewer's gaze. The key to the exterior is the foot. It supports the unity of inside and outside; it raises the bowl up and grounds it at the same time.

Since the appearance of the potter's wheel, bowls have been made in the same way. While the cylindrical wall widens beneath the potter's guiding hands and the wall's rim eases outward in resolute curvature, a miracle always occurs: The inside releases itself to the opening. Bowls take on their form, bit by bit, from this point on. Witnessing this process, the viewer may find himself amazed, like the early riser who sees the dawning of a new day, when light rouses and lends shape to daybreak's indeterminate forms.

Bowls have commonalities with this age-old story of creation. Above this deep layer of connections—which can only be assumed—lies their individual genesis. This is influenced by the motives, intentions, and abilities of the ceramicist. And, once more, it is the concentration on throwing that connects all ceramicists. Many bowls Young-Jae Lee throws, nevertheless, and however often she repeats the "same" form, it is always only about the one bowl in the process of being created.

Views of a Bowl

Looking at a bowl is like exploring an unfamiliar garden. It has many surprises, upon revelation, disclosing different features to us at every angle, here, concealing, there,

revealing an aspect not yet noticed. If we look into a bowl, for instance, toward the bottom, we peer into it from above. Its roundness attracts our gaze. We acknowledge the depth of the bowl's bottom. We do not just see color, which becomes concentrated on the interior and seems almost unfathomable from our distance. The more we bend down, get closer, the more our sensory perception expands. Color becomes body, coagulates to form a glassy thickness, stratifies in crystalline crackle. Is the glaze really only the sheathing of a form, a decorative mantle? Glaze and form together produce the appearance of a bowl.

Yet, we fail to understand the bowl if we only look inside it.

We have to distance ourselves to appreciate the bowl in its entirety. In the exhibition, 601 bowls stand on the floor. They present their roundness in cool shades of green and gray, in bluish and a few light honey-colored tones. In the more distant bowls, inner roundness transforms into an oval; in exchange, body and foot are displayed. They cast overlapping shadows, capturing the tight space around their neighbors. In all their variations, they offer more or less of their volume and curvature. They show their external form. In some cases, we see only the transition of the lip into the bowl's curvature; in others, the curvature appears hemispherical beneath the rim; there, the cup of the bowl meets cylindrical foot; here, the foot is seen only as a ring; and, finally, other bowls we see standing on their feet.

Viewed this way, side by side in abundance, a kaleidoscope of bowls occurs in which we move about. From varying positions, we compose new views and color harmonies and thus experience in the example of many, the essence of a bowl. We discover a bowl placed on a glass shelf, almost at eye level. On a conical foot, its curvature is drawn upward in a restrained manner. Its rim swings outward just a touch. Its color, light gray, dissolves in the light, floats in space. The foot, in a warm beige, grounds the bowl on the base of the glass cube. As we draw closer, the foot and wall of the bowl become hidden and the bowl's roundness unfolds. At last we see the bowl's bottom in its entirety, dark, like the moon, which its crescent above preserves its full round form as a shadow. The color of the glaze intensifies in the depth of the bowl. On the exterior, the body becomes more luminous, the foot gleams a yellow ocher. The rim, now nothing more than a bright ring, encloses the bowl's circular shape.

It is quite different to hold a bowl in our hands. We feel the weight to get a sense of the form, judge the width of the rim, and feel the compactness of the foot. We hold the bowl in both hands to grasp its volume, feel its shape, and look inside. We trace the rim with our fingertip and allow ourselves the temptation of sounding the bowl with a flick of our finger. The resultant tone tells us something about the material, about the temperature at which the bowl was fired. We then hold the bowl by its foot, using just one hand, and raise it to eye level. Its physicality may be lost for a moment. As we turn the bowl slightly, however, we might discern an uneven curve on the rim's edge.

It would reveal that slight deformation the bowl received when it was lifted from the wheel. We are reminded that the bowl is not only something aesthetic, but something made.

On the Difference Between the Same Vessels

No two pots by Young-Jae Lee are alike. At the same time, inventing varied forms or making a unique vessel is of no interest for her. Rather, in limiting herself to one formal type, she aims to obtain the greatest possibility of variation. Divergence in sequence is her challenge.

From the outset, Young-Jae Lee was committed, in her vase pairs, to the difference between two of the same forms. Vase pairs were her subject. In recent years, this concept has consolidated and a new vase series has resulted: With the cylinder as her starting point, she has developed a tall thin vase with a slightly widened body that narrows into a hint of a neck that then opens outward into a vague mouth. The vases can have a trimmed foot or pull out from the bottom in a slight curve. To create nuances, Young-Jae Lee only changes the proportions, widening, elongating, narrowing, and creating a convex bulge in each pot. This results in different movements and rhythms. A distinctive pot is produced each time.

Paradoxically, the sureness of craft for such play with variation comes from constant practice with the same forms; this leads to mastery in the craft of pottery, indeed, as Eastern ceramicists emphasize, to the extent that the potter's hands work as though with a will of their own. Young-Jae Lee's hands follow her in her conception of form. They provide the assurance to decide what height the foot can bear and what depth the base of the pot can handle, how wide the pot is open or closed, how the lip or neck is positioned. It is not an intellectual decision. It is an understanding between the clear idea of the form, the instructions of the hand and clay, and a feel for the moment.

The variations of these "cylinder" vases prove to be most exciting when many are seen standing side by side. They draw toward one another, indeed, support and complement one another, resonate. No matter the sequence in which they are aligned, they provide their own rhythm. Like a song turned to image. We hear with our eyes. A unique sound is to be heard when our gaze engages with a single pot, passing from the form to the pot surface: slightly ocher-colored tracks in the white glaze trace the grooves from the rotation of the wheel. Over this are streaks of engobe, applied with a brush in curves or a near-vertical stroke. These are also hurried, but they are determined in the movement they borrow from the body of the pot, uniting and intensifying surface and form. Like throwing, painting also follows the principle of constant practice and minimal change. Young-Jae Lee already sees the way the vases are to be painted; hand and brush simply execute the result—as one Japanese master said with regard to the creation of a ceramic work: "It is not I who turn, but the wheel that turns, it is not I who paint, but the brush that paints."

On Throwing and on the Form of the Large “Cylinder” Vases

There is an intimacy when throwing bowls—there are, after all, only two participants: the clay and the operator of the wheel, Young-Jae Lee. In her large “cylinder” vases, as well as in the spindle-like vases thrown in one piece, Young-Jae Lee has embarked on a new path. She leaves the centering and pulling of the cylinders to her workshop assistants. The “semifinished” cylinders have to hold their own as coherent vessels, both formally and in terms of craftsmanship. If Michael Schmandt throws the cylinders, powerful, robust creations emerge. If the delicate Kyonga-Ha Kim throws them, a gentle and cautious approach is at work, resulting in a fragile and less tall cylinder.

Young-Jae Lee is presented with these guidelines and reacts to them; the dynamism of the thrower passes to her and needs to be included when she begins expanding the cylinder, setting the foot, and shaping the neck; she thus creates a starting point for herself that she does not determine. This working method releases her from her own, as she puts it, overly committed intention, creating distance from her ambition to work in a perfect way. All of this is conveyed to the vessel taking shape, and its impact is seen in the result.

Despite this “division of labor,” Young-Jae Lee pursues her own idea regarding form. She sees the vase as a body, as the abstract form of a human body. She derived important inspiration from the sculptures and drawings of Michael Croissant’s *Figuren* (Figures) series. Such abstracted body shapes, in particular, the animated S-shaped forms, gave her the courage to translate this sculptural idea into her ceramics and develop the “cylinder” vase type. In these, Young-Jae Lee’s previously existing attention to the physical proportions of the spindle vases or to the volume of bowls is realized in concrete terms. What is new and surprising is the transformation from the static and moribund form to the animated and lively. When Young-Jae Lee calls this series of vessels “cylinder vases,” she also alludes to their origin and this transformation.

When we look at these vases, their physicality as all as their contours win us over: narrow, mallet-shaped foot; elongated, slightly widening belly; extended tapering to the neck; a neck termination that is pulled distinctly outward. Foot and belly could not be more different. The one, clearly indicated, almost geometric; the other, vague and sweeping. The proportions of the bodies of the vases confuse us at first, for the way the elongated curvature stretches above such a narrow foot is very unusual, as is the way this curvature, barely diminished, expands outward again into the neck; finally, the mouth of the vase is remarkably wide in relation to the belly and foot. We find here neither the proportions nor the tension of the classical vase form; a form that describes the parts of the vessel in compulsory curves, a tension that needs to be carefully studied so the vessel does not give the impression of effusion or dullness. Young-Jae Lee does the exact opposite here: She reduces the tension to a minimum and aims at an unstable balance. Working solely with nuances is a tightrope walk, for

too little tension makes the succinct form an unsuccessful form. Two factors become important in this reduction: on the one hand, the movement in belly and neck, on the other, the angle between foot and belly. If this part of the vessel is right, it would be difficult for it to become imbalanced.

Seeing and learning, revising everything, we know about a form, about proportions, about motion, this is what these vases by Young-Jae Lee invite.

Table Vases

These vases attract light. Their bluish white or soft ice green connects them with the immaterial.

They take possession of the space.

We cast a glance at them in passing, perhaps just quickly. They move us. Whether again in passing or because we turn to them anew from another position, they attract our gaze all the more. Their seemingly fleeting, indeed, fragile appearance is of an almost incomprehensible, yet unavoidable presence.

The concept of the “cylinder” vases culminates in the table vases. They are so irresolute and succinct in their form that it is as though Young-Jae Lee stopped throwing prematurely. Yet, there is nothing incomplete about them; they are finished in sound concentration and ease. The form of the bodies of these vases grows fluently from a narrow support surface. Unlike the “cylinder” vases, the glaze comes to an end, in almost exact precision, roughly three fingers above the bottom of the vessel, thereby releasing a gray porcelain surface. It acts like a pedestal.

When we pick up one of these vases, we become aware of its weight. It feels unexpectedly robust, a reliable partner in its utilitarian function. We can picture flowers in these vases. A luxuriant bouquet, perhaps, whose proper upright position is enabled by the depth of the vase, and whose stems can lean outward thanks to the vase’s wide mouth. The single flower, the heavy blossom on the bent stem, is offered a much tauter stability, allowing it to tilt without tipping over.

Spindle Vases: Vases from Two Bowls

It is said of the bowl that its form is modeled on the palms of two hands placed together in an open gesture of offering or receiving. Vessels assembled from two deep bowls are a special feature of Korean ceramics: Two open bowls become a single closed storage vessel.

Young-Jae Lee takes up this tradition in her spindle vases and turns it into a rigorous formal concept. Young-Jae Lee emphasizes what is increasingly seen as a technical shortcoming in Korean vases, and is customarily covered up as much as possible:

The two bowls are recognizable as complete forms and entities, their seam clearly indicated. In this way, the fundamental idea of opening and closing via two of the same forms remains accessible. The volume of the two bowls, now enclosed, gives rise to the outward push of the spindle vase. As in the “cylinder” vases, Young-Jae Lee also sees the spindle vase form as a “body shape,” modeled, for example, on a body with arms akimbo. Such a pose can be read in the contour of the vase.

Following the process used in the older Korean vessels, a bowl for the lower part is first thrown, followed by the second bowl to match. This second bowl does not have a bottom, but a foot, which is the neck of the later vase. Both bowls are thrown from the foot outward into their width, but the second bowl is the part closing the vase, so that its foot has to be worked as neck, and its widening as narrowing. Once leather-hard, the foot and bottom section of the one vase and the neck and shoulder of the other are given their final form; the two parts are then fitted together and the seam is finished. The assemblage of the two results in an almost symmetrical mirror image, with the seam as central axis.

This mirroring idea is noticed only once the vases are viewed: It is not Young-Jae Lee’s objective to assemble two exactly identical bowls. The lower bowl is crucial. Its foot, widening, curvature, and height constitute the prompt to which the upper bowl will respond. Often, the upper bowl is a little taller and thus more elongated. The final trimming at foot and neck, followed by the assembling and smoothing of the seam is more like the sort of work performed on a sculpture. For this reason, the spindle vases are much sharper in form than the thrown pieces—displaying an exactness in the line where the two bowl halves meet, in the angles at foot and neck, and a smoothness on the surface. Glazed with a single-color glaze, they present a cool precision. This is moderated when in the non-trimmed areas’ slight traces of throwing can still be seen, or when discolorations resulted during firing.

Two sides of Young-Jae Lee’s ceramic works meet in the spindle vases. The conceptual treatment of geometric bodies, of dimensions and proportions, the creating, and the desire for perfection. They have been Young-Jae Lee’s intellectual “tools” since her student years. Her feel for the sensory, however, matured during her early Essen period, with her reconnecting with Korean ceramics, above all, with the seemingly unattainable beauty of the two-part vases. For Young-Jae Lee, this was an existential investigation. She came to terms with this historical and personal aspect through her long experience in working at the potter’s wheel: Through her sureness in the craft and her sense for the material, and through the strength that arises, or is necessary for the opening, in the closing, and the keeping closed of the form.

On Using

We may, at times, be fearful of using such vases. We take possession of them, of course, and in viewing them, enter into a relationship. Indeed, this is the first step toward the proper approach to pots. For they enrich us both with their beauty and with their usefulness.

Beauty is contained in the functional, says Yanagi Soetsu, founder of *mingei* philosophy. To put beauty in the service of the functional, to take geometric shapes like the cube, rectangular solid, cone, and sphere as the basis for design, is one of the ideas of the Bauhaus—a tradition to which Young-Jae Lee is committed. Her Korean heritage, the cheerful, weightless feel for form and subtle colors is still present, however—and the extremely colorful folklore. Although the latter does not play a role in Young-Jae Lee's ceramics, the Korean element may not be reduced to the soft and sensitive. For the robust in Korean ceramics also finds expression in Young-Jae Lee's vessels and results in the strange mixture of solid and oscillating form, which, for some, is initially disconcerting. The proportions of her pots are not exaggerated, but unusual, though this does not get in the way of them being used. In Korean ceramics, there are no decorative vessels. Each one has its purpose and its use. Here, too, Young-Jae Lee embraces her legacy and translates it into vessels that did not previously exist in Korean ceramics: flower vases.

Good pots educate people for the better, claims Yanagi Soetsu. If we reach less high and have modest hopes, they may teach us to pay attention, to recognize their nature, their value, and to engage with them. What we use a bowl for, what we put inside it, are decisions that can awaken both curiosity and imagination. We can see that a little looks like a lot more in a large bowl, that a tall and deep bowl can handle being filled. The color of a bowl, platter, or dish, of a cup, and the color of food and drink will coerce us into trying out new things. Pots have an influence on a space and their surroundings. They prompt us continually to think about where, in what light, or in which company we put them. Which vases do we pick for which flowers? Perhaps we find flowers that will enable a particular vase to realize its potential. These are everyday decisions, aesthetic games—certainly not new inventions. But once this has become cognizant, these are soothing experiences for the heart and mind. To see and understand works of art is an artistic act. A pot can invite this as much as a painting or sculpture can. A pot that presents function and beauty in harmony fulfills this purpose far beyond daily use.

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