

TRANSFERRED BEAUTY - THE HAIR ART OF LEE SEKYUNG*

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In recent years, female Korean artists such as Yeesookyung (b. 1963) and Shin Meekyong (b. 1967) have garnered much attention on the international art stage for their inventive re-interpretations of classic Korean craft objects. Using different materials - Yee works mainly with porcelain while Shin primarily uses soap both of their practices are informed by Asian ceramics, more specifically Joseon period (1392-1910) porcelain. Lee Sekyung (b. 1973) is rapidly joining the ranks of this illustrious duo. Her large scale installation *Hair on carpet* and *Hair on plate* series belong to the most exciting discoveries in the acclaimed show *Beyond and Between*, organised by the Leeum Samsung Museum in 2014 for its 10th anniversary.

A native of Seoul, Lee graduated with an MFA degree in crafts from Sungshin Women's University in 1998, where she specialised in ceramics. In the same year, she moved to Germany with her artist husband and enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts, Münster. In 2001, Lee was accepted in the masterclass of the Belgian installation artist Guillaume Bijl. Under Bijl's tutelage, she began to shift her practice towards installation, creating environments of transformed reality through the assemblage of ready-mades and materials that are familiar in daily life in this case, human hair.

In literature and the arts, eyes are often referred to as the 'window to a person's soul' and lips compared to rose buds, but no other part of the human body has such rich symbolism and exerts an enduring fascination that transcends cultural borders as hair. Its length, colour and shape can be an indicator of age, race and gender, while how it's worn - covered, braided, bound up and so forth - can reveal social status, ethnic or religious affiliation. Hair enthralls and enchants, but only as long as it is alive. Once detached from the head it is just a nuisance and even elicits repulsion. The preoccupation with these contradictory values of hair has set Lee Sekyung on a journey to explore the potential of discarded hair as a medium of expression. Lee states:

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Ever since I was a child, I have always had long hair and have many fond memories about my long hair. I have always thought the hair is a symbol of women's beauty so I have taken really good care of my long hair and have had some kind of obsession with it until now. However, this attachment to my hair has also been quite a nuisance. I received a lot scolding from my mother regarding the fallen hair all over the house.

Hair is part of the body to be decorated and cared for, and is often considered a symbol of beauty but it is a subject of filth and dirtiness when you find it on the bathroom floor or around the dinner table. This double sidedness with its instantaneous shift in meaning is what drew me towards it, making hair an extremely fascinating medium for me.

I studied ceramics in Korea. After I went to Germany to study Fine Art, I started to sincerely contemplate my work. The first difference that I noticed immediately between Korea and Germany was hair colour. Being in this unfamiliar country far away from home made me deeply think of myself and this thought was naturally conveyed in my work with hair. Since then, I have put this duplicity of both material and cultural aspects into my works with hair." (Excerpt from email interview with the artist, August 2015)

Lee first began with gluing single strands of hair on paper to create detailed, exacting figurative compositions easily be mistaken for fine pencil drawings. The discovery that hair loses its innate properties in this process and becomes a pictorial element was fascinating and inspired Lee to search for further exploitations of this medium. Challenging the commonly accepted negative connotation of dead hair as unhygienic germ carrier, Lee transferred her hair drawings onto massproduced, undecorated porcelain tableware. ceramic tiles or even porcelain door handles and soap, turning them into aesthetically appealing objects. Dyed in red and blue tones the strands of hair are painstakingly glued onto the smooth porcelain grou Motifs from East Asian blue-and-white ground wares, Dutch and Portuguese tile patterns, Russian constructivist design vocabulary or the characteristic onion patterns of Meissen porcelain popular in 1930s Germany are appropriated to decorate the vessels.

The craftsmanship is mind-boggling, and even though some of Lee's works in the series Hair on plate seem to be near perfect imitations of original historical pieces, her practice goes beyond appropriation and reproduction. Her porcelains are not intended as individual unique objects, but have to to be understood installation work. The objects are work. displayed an ensemble in perfectly lit showcases or plinths covered in velvet simulating a museum's context, challenging the audience's perception on multiple levels. What at first sight appears like a Joseon period blue-

and- white dish is actually. decoracay a contemporary ready made decorated with meticulously glued-on dyed hair. And hair on a plate'? Normally, this would be unacceptable to diners, but Lee's hair-decorated tableware offers such a pleasant aesthetic experience that the idea to eat from them no longer seems absurd.

Hair on plate has been exhibited various times in Germany as well as in Korea, and interestingly, the reaction of the audience is widely different.

I felt big differences when I had many exhibitions in Korea as well as Europe. The work with hair first began in Germany. In Germany, despite some unpleasant experience with the hair in the work, most of people well understood the uniqueness expressed by an artist and they conceived of the concept and handicraft technics in the work as some kind of way to cultivate one's mind about Asia. I was working with Gallery Schmela in Duesseldorf at this time and lots of works were sold to German or European collectors. After a while, I had a chance to have a solo exhibition in Korea. Interestingly, Korean viewers thought the hair as a filthy and disgusting material and such a negative reaction was more than I expected. (Excerpt from email-interview with the artist, August 2015)

The same concept of bringing together hair and objects of quotidian life in what is usually considered an unpleasant combination is applied in the large-scale installation Hair on carpet. Realised for the first time in 2004 for the Wewerka Pavilion in Münster, this work is produced on site and lasts for the duration of the exhibition. Lee uses a custom-made monochrome rug as base, upon which she distributes tiny hair fragments dyed in black to form floral patterns borrowed from Persian or Chinese carpets. The result is so stunning nobody would take offense at the fact that there is hair- and even heaps of it-on the carpet! Normality returns at the end of the show, as the hair is vacuumed away and the carpet cleaned.

Lee takes this installation to a further dimension for the Leeum Samsung exhibition in 2014. Over several months, she decorates a 19m long carpet with intricate hair designs that cover the long ramp leading to the main exhibition space. For Lee the laborious process of fixing the tiny bits of hair one by one on the carpet is a "training in adjusting the mind and body, or as a ritualistic enactment of an ardent desire" (Samsung Foundation website, accessed 2015).

For this exhibition, visitors are allowed to walk on the carpet. The chance to engage directly with the exhibit enhances the audience's experience, but also makes it more complex the admiration for the artist's intense labour and technical skills is mixed with the unpleasant sensation of walking on discarded hair and the fear of destroying an artwork.

After resettling in Seoul in 2011, Lee started a new approach to working with hair. The series *Recollection* was conceived for her first solo exhibition in Korea, hosted by the innovative, non-profit SongEun Art Space in 2013. Up to this point, Lee normally uses her own hair, or the hair of family members and close friends. For the new project, members of the public are invited to provide the artist with a short account of their fondest memory together with some of their own hair. These are worked into "hair paintings on white ceramic tiles. The project poses new challenges for Lee. For one, she has to find a visual representation that bears justice to somebody else's memory. Further, the quantity and quality of hair provided might not be sufficient to complete the painting. The results and this project are however so overwhelmingly responses for positive that Lee intends to expand the project further and to include the participation of people she is personally interested in.

Lee's hair art is not a singular phenomenon in contemporary art practices, there are a number of male and female artists worldwide who work primarily with hair as a medium. What remarkable in her work not only the high level of craftsmanship but also the freshness of her conceptual framework. Beyond an instantaneous gratifying visual experience, her objects and installations engage the audience intellectually, inviting us to reflect on the mutability of our perception and appreciation of something that is as common as hair.

Dr Khanh Trinh specialises in Japanese and Korean art. She has curated several major exhibitions for the AGNSW and lectured and published widely on contemporary Asian art. She is presently Curator of Japanese art at the Rietberg Museum, Zurich

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