

NEW CERAMICS

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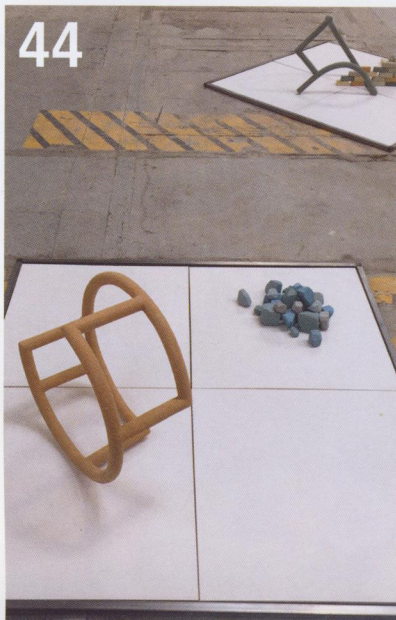
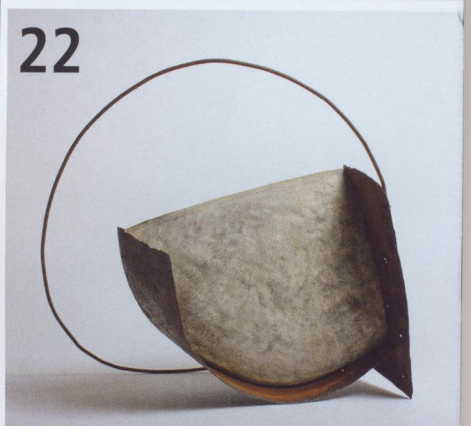


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COVER:  
Peter Callas  
“Hot Pocket 208”  
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# The Ceramic Sculptures of SHIN YEON JEON

Gregory McLemore



Crowd-I - 23 x 62 x 26.5 cm, Ceramics, 2009

Looking at art and experiencing art, in my mind, are two very different things. I frequently view art. I try to get into the artist's head and understand what they are saying, exploring, or trying to demonstrate. I often see references to other artists and thinkers of our time, and before long, have found the perfect mental compartment to trap the art in. Strangely, I can't seem to do that with Shin Yeon Jeon's work. Every time I view her ceramic sculptures, I realize that I am having an actual emotional experience; that the artist has superseded her own rational thoughts and presented us with something deeply human.

I recently viewed a solo exhibition of hers at Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland. It was titled *From Invisible to Visible*. Had I not been immediately pulled into the exhibition itself, I would have noticed that title. It gives insight into an underlying theme of Jeon's work; the idea that she is making the small, fleeting, scary, transitional thoughts that we normally keep hidden, visible.

As I walked into the gallery, I felt as if I had left the community college altogether and had stepped into a carefully curated porcelain collection/drawing room/parlour of some ancient and eccentric collector. The gallery, a very intimate space with soft warm light, gray walls, and glowing hardwood floors, was sparkling with reflections of light. It was an immersive experience. As I looked around, I softened my step, becoming more and more aware of the fragility around me and how my body (suddenly feeling heavy and oafish) could so easily knock over and destroy these fragile things. I began to walk toward the Head Totem pieces. As I did, I felt a slight loss of my own equilibrium. Their delicate balance challenged my own. Essentially, they are heads and sometimes breasts, stacked (seemingly precariously) atop each other, to form semi-vertical columns. There were different types of totems, some a matte finish and others with a shining glaze. As I viewed them, I was given one surprise after another: a shocking difference in texture here, a tiny painted face embed-

ded in the glaze there, an abrupt shift in the form's direction. There is some peace, but little rest, in these pieces. The viewer has no choice but to move into and over them, looping around the sculpture, carefully investigating, knowing all the while that they are just starting to unfold.

Another group of sculptures Jeon has developed, and my personal favourites, appear as groups of faces merged together, usually at the rear or side of their heads. The connections between faces are often obscured by a breast or an unruly coil of clay. The faces (the true beauty of her work) often show subtle distinctions between related (and sometimes terrifying) emotions, though occasionally quite different in appearance or presentation. These pieces demand you walk around them, and you are rewarded for your effort. The process of watching them unfold as you circle them and come to understand the relationship between front and back, side and side, is part of what makes them so intriguing.

Jeon also creates functional ware. What



is most interesting about this work, in my opinion, is how it relates to her sculpture. She imbues cups, bowls, and other vessels with a similar feeling of strangeness, alienation, sorrow, and sensual pleasure that is found in the sculpture. Like in the sculpture, the colours are fantastical and complex, and are the mark of an artist that has spent a great deal of her life's energy devoted to her task. Her unique visual language permeates everything she does.

As a painter, I fully admit my limited understanding of the various processes involved in the medium of clay. I understand color and form much more than the mechanics of hand building, throwing pots, and all the complexities of glazing. What I can speak to is the effect of the work on my senses, and the technical skill of her forms and figures.

Jeon's faces, usually female, let us experience the gravity and complexity of life. They hold sadness and beauty, darkness and light. Even at their most sinister, they still hold compassion and softness, while at their most delicate, there is at least a hint of fear or danger. Occasionally, I see glimpses of a face that is no longer a part of the human race, and has moved into some unknown place, likely to never return. The intersections of different forms, the secret places, are always surprising. An unlikely nipple, skull, or gaping dark hole may confront you as you transition between the multiple faces of one work. Often these transitional spaces are echoed in the faces and thus given meaning. In this way, the sculptures act like paintings. The physicality of Jeon's sculptures is also notable. The forms, whether they are feet, breasts, or faces, are clear and striking. The underlying muscular and structural integrity of the figures makes them very much alive. I am reminded both in spirit and structure of Paula Rego, the Portuguese painter of powerful but sometimes demonic, sometimes victimized, often tragic women. Jeon doesn't go into the territory of fables and fairy tales like Rego. Rather her work exists in a space we, the viewers, create. Jeon's intense psychological explorations help us explore our own mental landscapes, our fears and our memories, our desire to feel the depth of life.

Gregory McLemore is an artist, adjunct professor, and occasional writer. He currently lives in Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

Recollection-I - 29.5 x 24.5 x 21cm, Ceramics, 2012



#### Shin Yeon Jeon

is a ceramic artist and writer, living in Tahlequah Oklahoma, was born in Seoul, Korea, and came to America in 1996. She received B.F.A. in oriental painting from Ewha Womans University and earned her M.F.A. from Towson University. Since 2004, Shin Yeon has authored over fifty six articles published for the Ceramic Art Monthly in Korea, *Ceramics: Art and Perception* in Australia and *Ceramics Technical* in the U.S., introducing the American ceramic art world and well-known individual artists. Summer 2013, she was invited to present "American Ceramic Artists and Their Works - I, II" and led a workshop "Narrative Portrait Bust" to the international audiences at the Ceramic Creative Center, Clayarch GimHea Museum in Korea. She is an Assistant Professor of Art at Northeastern State University in Oklahoma.

Her work can be seen at [www.shinyeon.com](http://www.shinyeon.com)

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Two Heads - 58.5 x 37 x 32 cm, Ceramics, 2007

