WEST TO EAST
AND BACK AGAIN
THE CERAMICS OF STEVEN YOUNG LEE
by Casey Ruble

Blue and White Jar, 23 in. (58 cm) in height, porcelain with inlaid cobalt pigments.
Trade of goods between the East and the West dates back to the early days of the Silk Routes, but it wasn’t until the period of early modern colonization that Eastern motifs, styles, and subject matter became vogue in the art of the West. At the same time, Europeanizing trends appeared in the art of the East: a cross-cultural hybridization had begun.

In today’s fast-paced times—when it takes less than a day to travel halfway around the world, when we can communicate with anyone, anywhere, with just the click of a mouse—such hybridization has become commonplace. Identities such as “Eastern” and “Western” are now even more fluid and complex, to the point that, say, a ceramic artist of Korean descent can be raised speaking English in Chicago, pick up Chinese during a year-long stay in China, and ultimately end up directing a residency program that draws people from across the globe to a small, mostly white town nestled in the mountains of Montana.

Such is the story of Steven Young Lee, who, after finishing his MFA at the New York College of Ceramics at Alfred University in Alfred, New York, participated in a cultural and educational exchange fellowship in Jingdezhen, China, made multiple visits to his family’s hometown of Seoul, Korea, did residencies at the Clay Art Center in Port Chester, New York, and Lillstreet Art Center in Chicago, Illinois, taught at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver, Canada, and currently works as the resident artist director of the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, Montana. These varied experiences in far-flung locales—particularly in China and Korea—have influenced Lee’s aesthetic sensibility and technical approach. “My work examines how realities are created based on experience and environment,” the artist explains. “I like to question and challenge preconceptions of identity and culture.”

Take, for example, Lee’s 2008 Blue and White Jar—perhaps better titled Dreamy Smurf Goes to China—one of a series of pieces inspired by storage vessels from the Korean Joseon Dynasty and by...
the neo-Confucianist tenet to “let things be what they are.” Like
the other jars in this series, Blue and White Jar was created by
joining two thrown parts, but without trying to create a perfectly
symmetrical form. The result is an object solid yet eccentric in
character, with the top half intact but the bottom subtly buckled
due to the weight it’s been asked to support. On the surface of the
jar are vignettes featuring cartoonish versions of traditional Chi-
nese landscapes. Reclining atop one vignette’s frame is the Dreamy
Smurf character; another Smurf, holding a bouquet, is centered
in a vignette on the back. Other jars are similarly playful, where
advertising mascots for popular cereals—such as Tony the Tiger
and the Trix rabbit—frolic among Asian-looking pine trees. Lee
created the decoration on these jars by using an inlay technique
common to traditional Korean ceramic production and fired the
pieces with a clear glaze that runs slightly, pulling the inlaid cobalt
pigment downward to create a greater sense of depth.

Other jars in this series are void of pop-culture surface deco-
ratiion, but what they lack in humor they well make up for in
seductiveness. Each is coated in layers of high-end automotive
paint—Corvette “candi” red, Mercedes royal blue, Lexus pearl
white—yielding an almost atmospheric visual depth due to
microscopic metallic flakes suspended in the paint. Executed by
professional auto body painters, the paint jobs are immaculate—a
marked contrast to the intentional irregularities in the jar forms.
This combination also produces an evocative dissonance between
age-old techniques and technologically advanced ones, as well as
between the unique original and standardized production.

References to mass production crop up in Lee’s other works
as well—most notably in sculptures involving multiple bunny
rabbits of the sort one might find in the children’s aisle of a dol-
lar store. Lee used a press mold to produce close to a hundred of
these porcelain bunny forms, which are solid in color and have
bulbous bodies and blank ovals for eyes. In some pieces, groups
of bunnies are placed on large circular or rectangular tiers, recall-
ing store-window displays. Other pieces consist of a single rabbit
head, with various surface treatments such as a celadon glaze with
hand-carved flower motif. One can’t help but compare these works
to Jeff Koons’ stainless steel Rabbit (1986), but Lee’s pieces have
an added meaning: Whereas Koons’ sculpture resides firmly in the
realm of American pop culture, Lee’s rabbits reference not only
Western Easter bunnies but also the Chinese zodiac. In fact, it was
the latter reference that first compelled Lee to make the pieces.
“When I first arrived in China,” he says, “people kept asking me
what my birth year was. I told them I was born in the year of the
rabbit, and they would make assumptions about me based on that.
It wasn’t until much later that I realized I’d calculated my birth
year incorrectly—I’d been using the Western Gregorian calendar,
but according to the lunar calendar that Eastern cultures use, I
was actually born in the year of the tiger. I was fascinated by the
difference between the characteristics of those two signs and how
it changed people’s initial perception of me.”

This kind of “bilingualism” is also evident in Birds of North
America (2007), another set of Joseon-dynasty-inspired jars. Here,
Lee placed decals of birds native to Western countries (cardinals,
blue jays) atop inlaid pine trees executed in the style of Japanese
and Chinese ink painting. Like Granary Jar and Blue and White
Jar, at first glance these pieces appear to be typical examples of
chinoiserie; it is only on further inspection that one realizes that
Lee is not merely appropriating a visual style but rather integrating
various visual languages; the separate elements remain relatively
autonomous but engage in communication with one another. One
might draw a parallel between this and immigrants’ experiences
of assimilation versus integration—the former being wholesale
absorption into the dominant culture; the latter, adaptation to that
culture but without abandoning one’s native identity.

Lee puts a personal spin on this idea in his series of pagoda-
topped vessels inspired by Chinese Han dynasty spirit jars. Like
Birds of North America, these pieces initially seem indecipherable
**Laying it on Thick**  
*by Steven Young Lee*

For the inlay pieces, I draw into the surface of the leather-hard clay with a set of small woodcarving knives. The timing and choice of clay is crucial to get a clean line; the porcelain provides a smooth clean surface to draw on, but if the clay is too dry the edges will tear and crumble. The drawing takes two to three days, during which time the work is kept in a plastic tent to maintain humidity and protect the drawn lines.

In the traditional Korean inlay process, the slip is added to the leather-hard piece and then scraped off when dry to reveal the inlaid colored clays. I've tried this method in the past but found that I would often lose some of the detail in my drawing. I now bisque-fire my pieces after carving, sand the edges down with sandpaper, and then fill in the carved lines with cobalt/porcelain slip. After the slip dries on the surface, I scrape off the excess with a metal rib. This slip is reconstituted and used again. The surface is wiped clean of excess slip and then glazed with a clear glaze.

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**Custom Colors**  
*by Steven Young Lee*

In some of my pieces, I have worked with other professional craftsmen to execute parts of the process. For instance, in the series of jars inspired by the Joseon Dynasty I outsourced the surface treatment to Travis Johnston at Economy Auto Body, a local automotive body shop in Helena, Montana, that specialize in custom paint jobs on cars and speedboats. They use a basecoat/clearcoat system allowing me to choose from a line of DuPont Chromabase pigments that can be matched to a specific make and model of car (BMW Black, Lexus Pearlescent White, etc). Mica flakes and additional clear coats were also added to increase the surface depth.

It was important to find the right people who could understand the ideas and importance of the finish. Their experience with specialty jobs helped them relate to my vision for the pieces and complete them effectively. The ability to communicate ideas became crucial to the execution of this work.

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**recipe**

**WHITE SLIP BASE**  
(cone 9/10)

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Colors for inlay slip:
Blue: Cobalt Oxide 1–2%
Black: Cobalt Oxide 4%, Manganese Dioxide 4%, Red Iron Oxide 6%, Chrome Oxide 2%

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from their 2000-year-old predecessors, yet closer scrutiny reveals that several of the pagodas bear an uncanny resemblance to the beehive brick kilns that still stand on the grounds of the Archie Bray Foundation.

Throughout much of his work, Lee embraces the irregularities and mishaps that generally are seen as making an object worthless. The artist often intentionally cracks pieces or fires them to the point of breaking. In some cases he carves imagery on the inside of the vessel as well as the outside, letting viewers know that they are actually supposed to be able to see the interior. Other times he fills in the cracks with a textured mortar that is then covered in gold leaf. Lee thus challenges the identity of the vessel as a functional object meant to contain something. Indeed, the idea of containment—or lack thereof—is a key component in all of Lee’s work. Transgressing boundaries of all types—geographic, cultural, visual, functional—Lee allows a spilling out of meanings as diverse as the experiences that inspired them.

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