
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.



Above: *Birds of North America*, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, porcelain with inlaid cobalt and decals.

Left: *Gilded Pasture*, 29 in. (74 cm) in height, porcelain with celadon glaze, mortar, and gold leaf.



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 Chinese 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 decoration, 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 dollar 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, recalling 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

Instinct and Consequence, 81 in. (2 m) in height, porcelain, gold plating, glaze.





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.

Top to bottom: Blue Jar (Mercedes Bahama Blue Pearl Metallic F2332), Candi Red Jar (Laser Red Metallic Tri Coat B9407), Pearlescent White Jar (Lexus White Pearl Metallic L9018), Yellow Jar (Chrysler Prowler Yellow B9854), Black Jar (BMW Black Sapphire Pearl Metallic M9999), each 21 in. (53 cm) in height, porcelain with automotive paint: DuPont Basecoat Pigments followed by DuPont 62-7779 clear coat with Mica Medium Coarse Flakes.

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.

the author Casey Ruble works as a freelance art critic and editor and teaches painting and drawing as an artist-in-residence at Fordham University, Lincoln Center campus, New York, New York. For further information, see www.caseyruble.com.

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.

recipe

WHITE SLIP BASE

(cone 9/10)

Nepheline Syenite	15	%
EPK Kaolin	15	
Grolleg Kaolin	30	
XX Sagger Clay	25	
Silica	15	
	100	%

Colors for inlay slip:

Blue: Cobalt Oxide 1–2%

Black: Cobalt Oxide 4%, Manganese Dioxide 4%, Red Iron Oxide 6%, Chrome Oxide 2%

After a piece has been carved and bisque fired, inlay slip is applied and allowed to dry before it is removed with a metal rib. This allows Lee to preserve the precision of the carving.

