

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Sunkoo Yuh

The following text is an interview summary from a conversation conducted by Tom Spleth on behalf of the curator in May, 2007.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

When Sunkoo was young he wondered the same question. What is the meaning of life? He wanted life to be meaningful. He was searching, and felt that art could be meaningful and also a way to search in life as well. When young, the search was too direct, too serious, too dark – he looked at the meaning of life, and universal issues of life and death. When his wife got pregnant, his art shifted 180°. He became concerned about her health and the health of the child. The work focused on the mundane life which had become so important. This is where his work resides. Through the ordinary, he still sees all those issues from before, but through

expressions of everyday life his work has become brighter and lighter. This has been going on for nine or ten years now, and he is suspicious about the space he has created, resulting in a serious look at his current work.

What influences your work? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

The past influences his work. He lived in Korea for 28 years and in the United States for 20 years. When he was in Korea he never questioned his identity (never thought about being Korean) but when he came here it became a big issue. The issue of identity became a search for links to his ancestors and he became



*Sunkoo Yuh- Consolation
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

interested in Korean Folk Painting and Folk Art. He has identified with ceramic work from the Yi Dynasty - Punchong Ware, not refined ceramics, with free drawings on surface that are humorous and simple - this is his connection. He loves the techniques but the technology is not central. He thinks about what the factor is that causes longevity in work and the Punchong ware has that quality. He tries to put those qualities into his own work.

Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how?

The medium of clay itself is central. It is easy to change when wet, still fragile, even when fired. Clay is a deep metaphor for life in the lack of control in the fire. There is a parallel to life: do one's best and let it go. It is the reason he is in clay.

He is influenced by his ancestors' work, but also influenced by the West, and he feels that there is a mixed cultural impact.

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

When in ceramics, one does not stay in isolation; the whole procedure of ceramics is never alone. Although he does not work in collaboration or community when in the studio, he is in constant contact with peers.

What does "mastery" mean to you?

When young, one masters the technology, and as one grows older, one begins to see the conceptual aspect of work. In continuing growth one balances the two.

How long have you lived in the South?

Three years. He was in Korea for 28, Los Angeles for eight or nine years, upstate New York briefly, one year in Ohio, and five years in Illinois before moving to Georgia.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place.

His work is not connected to an exterior place, but is connected to his interior life.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Yes. He was always focused on technical issues when he was young. Like a kid in a candy store, he would try anything, as many techniques as possible; some he would accept, some he would reject, then run them through his work and make them his own. He has developed different techniques for multiple firing,

conducted much glaze testing, has worked out techniques for monumental ceramics and how to move and fire thick and heavy work.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

The arts community in Athens is very good. There are community work centers that have ceramics classes where he lectures, and where his students teach regularly. A locally run place called the Linden House provides a beautiful space to show and lecture and teach.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

Yes, he is more a philosophical keeper of the culture. He feels that his work, because it is a repository of craft and tradition, is a keeper of the craft culture.

How did you learn your craft?

In Korea, the importance was to be able to survive after graduation and his learning was very practical so that he could make pots to sell to support work and live independently.

Do you share your knowledge/technique/experience with others--the next generation of artists/craftspeople?

That is what he is doing now. He received a lot in his life from many teachers. So many gave so much, particularly emotional support and attitude. As a teacher, he passes that support on to students. The big issue is support by sharing. He gives them as much information as possible.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? What role do you think alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, and John C Campbell Folk School have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? Do you know of other institutions that have played such a role?

Universities all over the country generally do not have specific boundaries in programs anymore. We don't educate students in specific craft and by their choice they can be craftsman or artist. He educates them to be who they are and to know what they want to do.

Penland and other schools have a great impact on the community. The short intense programs with all kinds of good artists gathered in one place leads to

much more impact than universities. He feels fortunate to be part of that community where great things are happening.