

The Mind Status of the Universal Traveler

Jae Yong Kim Solo Exhibition <Donut Fear>

Tang Contemporary Art, 2021. 8. 7 ~ 9. 12

Two Different Colors Look Alike

Jae Yong Kim was born in Seoul, 1973. He was the second son whose father studied mechanical engineering mother majored in violin, and provided well for the family at the time. When there was a hike in need for construction projects in the Middle East during the late '70s and mid-'80s, his father was assigned as a construction site manager. Jae Yong, moving with his father, lived in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for five years until he was nine; his understanding of different cultures broadens during these five years. His affinity for Moorish ornament that makes him feel comfortable like an old friend and the emergence of motifs of Persian carpet and Arabesque¹ in his recent works are rooted in his experience of growing up in this period.

In his after-school clay modeling club during high school, Jae Yong finds his talent in creating with hands. However, there was a reason why he did not predict acceptance in Korean art colleges. Jae Yong experiences color blindness, which makes red and green look similar when juxtaposed. He said people's reactions varied when he presented a specific color combination he felt complete.² While studying in the United States, a professor of painting department recognized the uniqueness of the way he uses color as a talent and a high possibility as a painter. But the art teacher at the art academy in Korea advised him not to register after seeing his watercolor painting full of intense colors.

¹ Arabesque is a term originally used to describe Moorish patterns of leaves and spirals, however, until the mid19th century, the term was used for more broader motifs including fruits, flowers, masks, human beings, imaginary monsters; The term is limited to only describing decorations without human being and animal. Reference for more information, Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: DK, 2001 [1856])

² Interview with Jae Yong Kim. JYK Studio, Sin Sa-dong, Seoul, Jan. 31. 2020, Interviewer: Saemi Cho.

In 1994, he chose to move to the U.S. instead of pursuing an art degree in Korea. The University of Hartford in Connecticut provided an environment where he can learn and express freely. Jae yong majored in sculpture and became immersed in the material of clay. Clay is one of the most basic elements not only in sculpture but in ceramics, so he naturally became interested in ceramics. Media-centered attention is more diverse and broader than the genre-oriented specialization trend. Double majoring sculpture and ceramic not only prepared Jae Yong to acknowledge craftsmanship as well as understanding and expressing the narratives and symbols.

However, it was hard for him to use color in his work.

This is Not a Donut

Jae Yong's <Donut> Series plays a decisive role in making him internationally recognized as an artist. Ironically, the <Donut> series would not have happened if the artist was not met with peril. The artist planned that it was impossible to support a family working as a young artist in New York City. He, in an attempt to clear his realistic problems, invested in the food business but took heavy losses during the late 2000 economic crisis, which started in the United States and spread worldwide.

In 2008, a harsh reality came. Jae Yong was lost in a life where he can no longer be an artist. Without figuring out the answers to questions like, 'will I be able to make a living making a donut?' and 'will doing so help continue art?', he created <Donut>, not a donut, in despair. To turn fear into hope, and not to give up on life, the artist rigorously worked on creating donuts again and again. With those donuts, he had to fight his fear of color, which he has been avoiding. The artist, who strictly refrained from introducing color to his work because of his color blindness, is now expressing splendid field of color plays on the <Donut>. It would not have been possible if Jae Yong did not confront the fear and horror with the boundless belief and confidence in self.

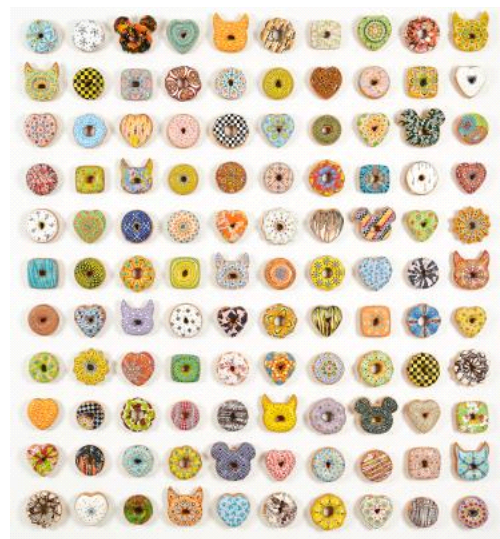
Maybe this is why people find themselves and their desires in the artist's <Donut> just like people find their own faces on smiley icons. People who seek happiness found beauty of life in his work. People who were tired in life found a psychological shelter. People who expected a life of abstinence found moral guidelines. People who dreamed of lustful love peeked a fantasy. Started when Jae Yong was on the edge of life, <Donut> became a vessel for many to pour themselves as well as a sort of magic mirror. It reflected the projected stare even more beautifully.

However, the shape of donut acts as a frame to differ what can be seen and not. Like we can only see as much as a keyhole when looking through it, the artwork only allows limited visual access. "Contour is a sculptural element of image". <Donut> itself acts as a borderline and limitation in shape, but at the same time, it encourages to complete the unknown in imagination.³ The artist reminds us through the contours of circle, heart, square, star, flower, and animal that perfect beauty of life, endless consolation, flawless moral code, and complete eros do not exist, and simultaneously helps to see the invisible completeness.

The reason why Jae Yong's <Donut> is not donut as it seems differs, in context, from why Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) <Fountain> is not a urinal, or Andy Warhol's (1928-1987) <Brillo Box> is not a box. Duchamp questioned the qualifications of art, and Warhol focused on bridging product and art in the capitalistic society of consumerism through <Brillo Box>. However, Jae Yong's <Donut>, not only asks whether it is art, nor claims "pleasure of aesthetics as an enemy."⁴ Jae Yong's <Donut> is a symbolic embodiment which does not require lack of visual attention.



[Fig 1] Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with a Gilt Cup*, 1635, oil on canvas, 88x113 cm ©Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



[Fig 2] Jae Yong Kim, *Donut Madness*, 2012-2020, ceramic, under glaze, glaze, Swarovski crystals, 180x164x3.6cm

³ Martine Joly, Lee Sun Hyung (trans.), *L'Image et les Signes* (Seoul: Dong Moon Sun), 1994, p. 177.

⁴ Because objective agreement of differentiating the art from the product disappeared, the <Brillo Box>, at least, made clear the audience cannot longer differentiate the art from the product." Arthur Danto, 'Philosopher Like Andy Warhol' in: Arthur Danto, Jung Yong Do, (trans.), *Philosophizing Art* (Seoul: Misool-Munhwa, 2007 [1999]), p. 97.

In the world of Jae Yong's <Donut>, the positive and negative are not too different. The donut can also be read as "Do Not." The title of the exhibition <Donut Fear> is a double negative of do not fear. The artist well understands people are actually afraid when told not to fear, and life without fear is life without happenings and destiny.

Jae Yong's <Donut> is also like the Vanitas, a still life painting style popular in the 17th Century Netherlands [Fig. 1]. Vanitas, a Latin word meaning vain and vanity, realistically depicted various luxury objects like a skull implying "memento mori, (remember the death)," and tableware decorated with jewels. Vanitas paintings were a device to remind us that human beings are mortal, and no wealth and pleasure is eternal. At the same time, it also served as a means of satisfying the viewer's greed and ego. "The soothing light in the still life paintings of the 17th Century Netherlands was the secular light emitted by modern civil society that is full of progressive energy and respect for rationality."⁵ Like the Vanitas paintings in every house of 17th century Europe, Jae Yong's art serves as an object of stare full of secular light sand desires [Fig. 2].

<XXL Donut>'s Smoothness and Sparkle

The <Donut> series are private, unique, and made with precious elements like clay and glazes; however, Jae Yong did not settle and sought ways to make more people "connect" with his art. His influence might be of his experience of confronting the <Elephant and Obelisk> by Bernini in the vast Piazza Minerva [Fig. 3]. This idea is actualized in his installation, the <Donut Garden>, in MIXC, the multi-cultural complex space in Shenyang, China.



[Fig 3] Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Elephant and Obelisk*, 1667, marble, height 5.47m Piazza della Minerva, Rome

⁵ Suh Kyeong Sik, Park So Hyun (trans.) *Perspectives of Anguish* (Paju: Dolbegae, 2009), p. 78.

The exhibition <Donut Fear> presents approximately ten pieces of <XXL Donut> size about 100cm in diameter. These artworks are not made of ceramic, but FRP Urethane or stainless steel. They boast smooth and glittering surfaces like a surfing board, a Harley Davison motorcycle, or a sports car. These commercial surface polishing techniques are a reflection of the automobile design culture of Detroit, where it is not far from the Cranbrook Academy of Art [Fig. 4].



[Fig 4] *Custom Car / Hot Rod*, shot at local car show/swap meet, U.S.A., 2008



[Fig 5] Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog (Orange)*, 1994–2000, © Christie, New York



[Fig 6] Jae Yong Kim, *XXL Donut 014*, 2019, urethane, Swarovski crystals, 95x100x36cm

Let's further discuss the difference in surfaces of Jae Yong's <XXL Donut> with Jeff Koon's (1955~) <Balloon Dog> [Fig. 5]. Both artworks' surfaces are extremely polished, clean, flawless, and no seams. However, these two surfaces have a fundamental difference. Koon's smooth surface is the key point in his art. The surface, which strongly requires a guaranty of anonymity and absolute positivity, is purposely childish to reject pain, scar, and resistance.⁶

In contrast, Jae Yong's <XXL Donut> is a product of an image projected through the artist's personal side of anxiety [Fig. 6]. This work was completed by adding the latent memories of the tightrope between the artist's self-confidence and fear. Color crystals spread out on the surface are reminiscence of fragments of his childhood memory. The image of shining jewels in the black Abaya did not erased from his memory [Fig. 7].

⁶ "Smooth things do not scar. It does not resist at all. It pursues the Like. Smooth object eliminates its dissenter. All negativity is eliminated." Han Byung Chul, Lee Jae Young, (trans.), *Die Errettung Des Schönen* (Seoul: Moonhak and Jisungsa, 2016 [2015]), pp. 9–10.



[Fig 7] *Earrings*, ca. 1860 Enamelled gold, brilliant-cut diamonds, rubies, pearls, England (perhaps, made), India (perhaps, made) influenced from the Middle East and India © V&A museum, London



[Fig 8] *XXL Donut* work in progress, JYK Studio, Seoul, 2020 © Jae Yong Kim

If the smoothness of Koon's <Balloon Dog> can be understood as smoothness that eliminates rebels and negativity, then we can speculate Jae Yong's smooth surface and glittering ornaments are a result of his effort to transform his identity from a cultural stranger to a global citizen [Fig. 8]. Jae Yong's <XXL Donut> embraces a stranger's loss and deprivation as well as while being a lighthouse for connection between the East and the West.

Worldwide Blue and White

People who have experienced cultural deportation understand 'identity' is not a shield for attacks, but a reason for displacement. Jae Yong was not enough Arab in the Arab nations, nor enough American in the U.S., nor enough Korean in Korea. The identity of a worldwide stranger who was not enough to become Arab, American, nor Korean, permeates throughout his art. Ironically, his identity, which did not belong to any culture, became an advantage to be loved by various cultures.



[Fig 9] Jae Yong Kim, *Flying Donut*, 2019, ceramic, under glaze, cobalt oxide, glaze, 19×38×10.5cm



[Fig 10] *Chunghwa Porcelain Jar with Ten Longevity Symbols*, Chosun period © National Museum of Korea

It is worth taking a deeper look into his works after 2018 when he introduces images of carpet and folk paintings on <Donut> using Cheonghwa (traditional Blue and white pigment) [Fig. 9]. Cheonghwa is a chemical compound used in ceramic to draw or color and made of Cobalt (Co), Iron (Fe), Manganese (Mn), Copper (Cu), and Nickel (Ni). Cheonghwa-Beakja, often called shortly Cheonghwa, is a product of a process of drawing with Cheong-Ryo (blue pigment) on white porcelain clay and the poured over white glaze called Jangsuk-yoo [Fig. 10]⁷. However, the Cheonghwa was not limited to the East; it was also loved in the Middle East and Europe. If Cheonghwa could be translated to Blue and White, it would be much easier to understand the global identity of Cheonghwa.

Dutch Delftware is especially known for its hybridity, which can also be seen in Jae Yong's art. 16th century Dutch Delftware originated in a town called "Delft," and it began as imitating Chinese Cheonghwa onto Italian Maiolica. When the 17th century Dutch East India Company imported large quantities of Cheonghwa, the desire for so-called "blue and white" swept through Europe.

However, Eastern Cheonghwa and Delftware had a crucial difference in the type of clay. Cheonghwa is made using Gaoling clay, which contains a high amount of metal, and can withstand over 1,300°C ; but Delftware is considered earthenware formed with low-fire clay with tin glaze and fired at a lower temperature in comparison [Fig. 11]. Although high-quality ceramics made of Gaoling clay traces back to the 8th Century Chinese city Jingdezhen, however, in Europe, despite the popularity of Maiolica of Italian Renaissance and the Dutch Delftware in

⁷ Kang Kyung Sook, 'Cheonghwa', Encyclopedia of Korean Culture, the Academy of Korean Studies, 1996. from: <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/Item/E0056864> [access: 2020. Feb.10].

17th century, it was not until 18th century Europe was introduced to the secret of Kaolin clay. In 1709, when Kaolin, similar to the component of Gaoling clay, was found in Saxony, Germany, it became a pivotal point in the history of ceramics.



[Fig 11] *Candlestick*, 18th Century, Delft, earthenware, painted, height: 14.9cm, width: 10.5cm, Delft © V&A museum, London



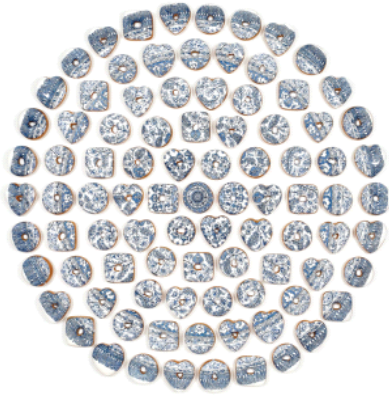
[Fig 12] *Italian Church (Waterloo)* Teapot, ca. 1820–1830, Lead-glazed earthenware, Height: 13.9 cm, Stoke-on-Trent, Spode Ceramic Works ©

However, we cannot undermine the art of ceramic pieces just because it is not made with Gaoling clay or Kaolinite. The expensiveness of Delftware was especially powerful enough to surpass the quality of clay. In the Netherlands, Kaolin could not be found naturally, so instead, they mass-produced the Delft Blue Tiles, which did not necessarily prioritize delicacy and elegance. Later, the tiles decorated magnificent and splendid palaces and mansions of nobles and led the blue and white trend in architecture. It then spread to England and was produced in every town, including London [Fig. 12].⁸

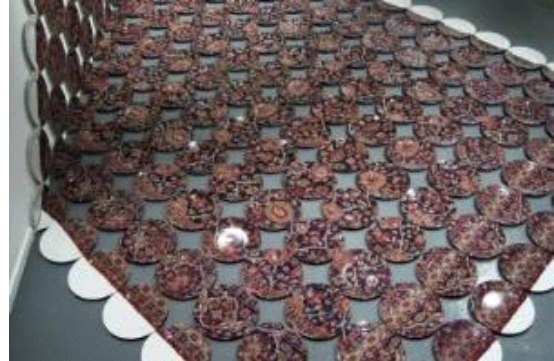
Blue drawings on white ceramic background became a powerful icon of globalization and deeply infiltrated the hearts of many people. It would not be an overstatement to describe anyone in the world who have experienced the 'blue and white' ceramic culture as having a cultural understanding and strong economic power.

Let's come back to Jae Yong's 'Blue and White.' Jae Yong's artwork is not technically Cheonghwa Baekja; because the Gaoling clay is not used. The process of making physical donut shapes is actually closer to that of Delftware. His work is formed with low-fire clay, and applied with underglaze before 1st firing, then after drawn on with blue pigment produced in China, Japan, and Korea. These pigments offer a range of viscosity and brightness, which the artist selectively utilizes to depict each subject

⁸ Lucy Trench (ed), *Materials & Techniques in the Decorative Arts* (London: John Murray), p. 114.



[Fig 13] Jae Yong Kim, *Growing up @ East and West*, 2018, ceramic, under glaze, cobalt oxide, glaze, Swarovski crystals, 135×132×3.8cm



[Fig 14] Marek Cecula, *The Porcelain Carpet*, 2002, 576 industrial porcelain plates & digital decals, installation dim. 4.20×16.5m, Grand Arts, KC

Mystical animals and imaginary objects from various cultures such as tiger and magpie, unicorns, phoenixes, Sip-Jang-Seng, and even donuts with wings are drawn on the donuts. Sometimes motifs that glimpse his growing up in the Middle West can be found. For example, the patterns in the <Growing up in the East and the West> (2018) is a product of appropriation of many images found on the web with the search keyword "carpet" [Fig. 13]. That is why traces of weaving threads like on general woven carpet cannot be seen anywhere in his work. Arranged in radial formations, arabesque patterns and combinations of various plantlike shapes seem to be floating. The Blue and White drawn on donut stimulates the viewer's imagination and breaks down the borders of culture and gravity.

Let take one more step and compare Jae Yong's <Growing up in the East and the West> with <Porcelain Carpet> (2002) by a Polish designer and ceramist Marek Cecula (1944~). <Porcelain Carpet> is installation art that showed hundreds of plates aligned in a grid on the floor and wall of the gallery [Fig. 14]. Cecula projected a real Persian carpet on to the manufactured plates in this work. It was a result of commercial technology deeply being embedded in the artist's work.

An English ceramist who had also been producing profound writings about ceramics, Edmund De Waal (1964~) interprets carpet in the context of still-life. He claims, "while avoiding funk and humor, it falls in a mannerism of regarding the object of assumption as a source of anxiety and worry".⁹ In a formal aspect, De waal's analysis is not wrong, but he dismisses the cultural background of why Cecula projected Persian carpet on the porcelain plates. Cecula was a Poland born Jew who moved to Israel, to Brazil, and then to the U.S. until he finally settled down in New York. He owned a design company while creating and teaching ceramic at the Parsons School of Design.¹⁰ Later, in need of creating more works like the <Porcelain Carpet>, Cecula returned to the home, Poland, where it was more efficient to produce smaller quantities of porcelain.

Like Cecula headed to Polish ceramic workshop to test porcelain, Jae Yong was immersed in testing to introduce the Cheonghwa when he was hired as a professor at the Seoul National University of Science and Technology. The artist once said one thing he must achieve if he comes back to Korea is Cheonghwa. Taking a particular interest in introducing the culture is a unique sensibility only available to a person who has experienced cultural differences firsthand.

<Donut> like the Stars in the Night Sky

The artist explains <Donut> symbolizes "various indicators of life."

"We (...) always want new things every day. (...) Are you worried because you can't have it? Are you afraid? (...) Donuts are trophies of our desire hung on the wall. Like the stars in the night sky, donuts are various indicators of life."¹¹

In the last solo exhibition in Seoul, about thirteen hundred donuts are installed. Beautiful ceramic donuts, like the stars in the night sky, are perfectly aligned in a grid. Why do these embodiments of desire, worthy of being life's goal, are hung following a strict arrangement? The artist explains the reason is that the <Donut> is a token of acknowledgment like trophies.

⁹ Edmund de Wall, Lee Yun Hee (trans.), 20th Century Ceramics (Seoul: Si-Gong Art, 2018 [2003]), p. 224.

¹⁰ Marek Cecula Homepage, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/marek-cecula> [access: 2020.Feb.11]

¹¹ In text messages with Jae Yong Kim, 2. 8. 2020, Receiver: Saemi Cho.

Jae Yong's <Donut> could not have wholly solved the artist's inner conflicts, but it clearly had a role in his self-reflection. The delicate and fragile "blob of creative energy"¹² is sprinkled on the <Donut> like the night stars. The <Donut>, acclaimed worldwide, is a realized product of his fragile dream, a bit-coin, an object of transition, and a symbol of the free trade world.

Jae Yong's work goes naturally in any place, such as museums, local festivals, the front yard of a celebrity, hipster cafe, shopping mall, museum stores, a spot for artwork in local intersections, a wall of the apartment. The psychological endeavor of memories of a worldwide man is universalized in the form of <Donut> and permeates our time and space. It will continue to spread, and it is proven consistently. Jae Yong's <Donut>, full of imagination, humor, and ornaments like night sky stars, is transcending the absolute positivity and cynicism of today.

Saemi Cho (Art Critic, Writer)

¹² Grayson Perry, Jung Ji-In (trans.), *Playing to the Gallery: Helping Contemporary Art in Its Struggle to Be Understood*, (Seoul: Wonder Box 2019 [2014]), p. 178.