

# The Ceramists Putting a Fresh Spin on Traditional Korean Techniques

In reinvigorating the craft's rich history, a group of female Korean and Korean American artists are creating a body of wholly distinct work.



By Alexa Brazilian

Nov. 27, 2023

The Brooklyn-based ceramic artist Eun-Ha Paek's pieces are defined by their renegade spirit. A recent work, a foot-high stoneware form, resembles a child's stick-figure drawing, but with a Surrealist bent: Instead of a head, it has a blue-and-white delftware-style dinner plate; instead of eyes, there are painted butterflies. "I like combining serve ware with food shapes, as if elements of a meal had come together and were having a dinner party," says Paek, who builds her works' hollow extremities, including legs that look like hot dogs, with a machine called an extruder and molds other parts by hand before coating the finished forms with cobalt and iron oxide washes and glazes. The pieces reflect Paek's training in animation, film and video at the Rhode Island School of Design — now in New York, she teaches ceramics at Doclay and at Greenwich House, and illustration at the Parsons School of Design — as well as her upbringing.

Born in Seoul, she immigrated to Los Angeles with her family when she was 9 and was dazzled by the new culture she encountered there. “The first place we went was to a drive-through for hamburgers,” she says. “I think my parents saw it as a symbol of having made it, to live in a country where food was brought to your car.”

Paek, 49, belongs to a group of women of Korean descent creating singular American ceramic art. Living everywhere from New York to California, they make experimental sculptures that reflect the traditions and aesthetics of both cultures. “There’s a rich heritage of ceramics in Korea that’s very much centered around incredible craftsmanship, detail and history,” says Jay Oh, 51, the senior director of arts and culture at the Korea Society in Manhattan. “But there’s a group of Korean artists in America who don’t feel the burden of going back to the past or ‘Orientalizing’ their work.” Or as Paek says, “I think in English, but I feel in Korean. It’s a very dramatic and evocative language. In Korean, for example, instead of saying, ‘The soup is boiling,’ you would say the sound the soup makes when it boils. That extraneous and whimsy is what I’m hoping to express.”

That’s also true for the Manhattan-based ceramic artist Janny Baek, 50, who was born in Seoul and moved to Flushing, Queens, when she was 3. She earned a B.F.A. in ceramics at RISD but went on to get a master’s degree in architecture at Harvard. “When I was young, I felt the whole point of immigrating to the United States was to have better opportunities and a successful career. I felt like I needed to do something more than be an artist,” Baek says. In 2019, though, five years after she and her husband established their practice, McMahan-Baek Architecture, she returned to ceramics. Baek now creates pieces that resemble amoebic animals or alien life-forms crafted from stained porcelain that she leaves unglazed for a matte, richly pigmented effect.

Besides being fascinated with color, the women are united by their zeal for experimentation, especially when it comes to mixing clay varieties and deploying unorthodox glazing methods. Inherent in ceramics is an element of the unpredictable (clay, after all, is an organic material, and even the most experienced artist will sometimes find herself bedeviled by it), and these makers all embrace the inevitable mistakes and surprises that arise in the process of building and firing their pieces. Raina Lee, 47, who lives in Los Angeles, creates Seussian works thickly coated with custom glazes featuring silicon carbide; the compound triggers reactions that produce textures suggestive of dried lava, dripping icicles or barnacles. Over the years, she has avoided making traditional vessels and vases, her pieces more often resembling decayed versions of those forms or artifacts weathered by the elements of time.

Jennie Jieun Lee, 50, who emigrated from Seoul when she was 4 and now lives between New York and Boston, has a similar affinity for material manipulation. Her clay “paintings,” as she calls them, are squares of glazed stoneware on wood panels inside picture frames, and she makes expressive porcelain busts using classical-style plaster molds bought on eBay. She removes the busts from their molds when they’re mostly set but still wet and flexible, then smears their features, adding blobs of different clays and, finally, dribbling rainbows of gloopy glazes over them to create haunting, melting faces. “My mother was an artist, and we would go to all the museums in New York, seeing minimalism and Abstract Expressionism,” says Lee, who’s now a ceramics professor at her alma mater, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University. “These genres have influenced my work in a big way.”

Though all these artists marry traditional Korean craft with an American free-spiritedness, they each do so differently. For the 32-year-old Soojin Choi, who came to the United States from Changwon, South Korea, for college, the idea of

communication, and what can be lost in translation, defines her structurally intricate pieces. Based in Philadelphia, where she's a resident artist at the Clay Studio, a nonprofit creative center focused on ceramics, Choi makes oversize stoneware sculptures of balloonlike heads that call to mind Surrealist works, and others that feature pairs of human figures with their arms, legs and faces twisted together, pretzel style. "I'm interested in gestures and facial reactions because I believe we can read each other more clearly through body language, especially because I'm always thinking and speaking in two different languages, and not perfectly in either one," she says. "In some ways, I feel like a foreigner in both Korea and America now — but at the same time, I feel more empathetic for the differences between the countries, too." It's a sentiment shared by many of Choi's contemporaries: that making art can be uniquely poignant when the heart has more than one home.

Photo assistant: Takako Ida. Set designer's assistant: Steven Ruggiero

**Alexa Brazilian** is a contributing editor at T: The New York Times Style Magazine.

## Process: Alexander McQueen fashion, and the art it inspired

A new collection sits beside works by 12 female artists, turning the brand's Mayfair store into an art gallery

**Matt Fidler**

Thu 9 Jun 2022 01.00 EDT



*Wang* by Jennie Jieun Lee. The artist said: ‘In developing my ceramic sculpture, I initially threw several vessels on the wheel and combined them together to make a tall piece in the wet stage. Post the initial bisque firing, I glazed the surfaces to imitate the arresting red leather dress worn by the model Wang in the look book provided to me. With clay, I added my interpretation of the four-ring detail in a matching red leather clutch to the top and sides of the piece, finishing it with a reflective palladium glaze’

Photograph: Aleksandra Dragoi/The Guardian

## What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

By John Vincler, [Jillian Steinhauer](#), Max Lakin, Martha Schwendener and Travis Diehl

*Want to see new art in New York this weekend? Start on the Upper East Side to catch Issy Wood's pleasingly discomfiting paintings at Michael Werner. Then head to Chelsea for Zoe Leonard's photographs of the Rio Grande at Hauser & Wirth. And don't miss Jennie Jieun Lee's wildly colored ceramics at Martos in TriBeCa.*

CHINATOWN

### Jennie Jieun Lee

Through Oct. 22. Martos Gallery, 41 Elizabeth Street, Manhattan; (212) 560-0670, [martosgallery.com](http://martosgallery.com).



Jennie Jieun Lee's "Range Anxiety" (2022), slipcast-porcelain and glaze. Charles Benton



Jennie Jieun Lee's "Moon Burn" (2022), slip-cast porcelain and glaze. Charles Benton

[Jennie Jieun Lee](#) might be described as a ceramic artist, but she reaches much further than that in “[Marie](#)” at [Martos Gallery](#). Wildly colored vessels thrown in porcelain are filled with flowers Lee grew herself — zinnias, snap dragons, amaranth and dahlias. These are accompanied by ceramic human heads with crazy, runaway glazes, slabs of clay shaped into little garments and globs of slipcast-porcelain strung into an evocative “garland.” At the center of the show is a re-creation of the tomb of [Marie Laveau](#) (1801-1881), a 19th-century Creole voodoo practitioner who was also a hair stylist to the wealthy of New Orleans and who even intervened on behalf of death-row prisoners.

There is a feral quality to Lee’s work that fits her subject and approach: off-center vases covered with cryptic markings; ceramic heads that look like they’re weeping or melting. After Laveau’s death, her tomb became a shrine to supplicants who made desperate wishes marked by three X’s. Visitors to Lee’s exhibition are invited to ask for their own wishes and many have done so, placing coins and trinkets at the base of “Marie’s Tomb” (2022).

The show might be called an “interactive sculptural installation” but Lee is obviously shooting much higher, asking, How do you mediate between different worlds? Can art still achieve this level of shamanistic engagement? Using history, malleable clay and a simple invitation to connect, Lee transforms the sterile gallery showroom into a more significant, sometimes even spiritual, space.

*MARTHA SCHWENDENER*

TRADITIONS

# Unconventional Urns That Go Beyond Solemnity

Following a period of great loss, how we talk about death has changed — so, too, has the way we think it should look.

By Isabel Ling

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Unlike many cultures, Americans have very few rituals surrounding death — no monthly remembrances, no festivals. Yet over the course of the pandemic, conversations on mortality have become more and more prevalent in popular media. In 2021’s “Sex and the City” follow-up, “And Just Like That,” a distraught Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) stashes her late husband’s remains among her most prized possessions: her shoes. A subplot of the third season of “Atlanta,” which aired this past spring, finds a pair of characters played by LaKeith Stanfield and Zazie Beetz crashing a so-called living funeral ceremony in Amsterdam, where one of them receives grounding life advice from a death doula.

And a new generation seems not only more willing to talk about dying but also to have strong aesthetic opinions about it. This shift is announcing itself most strikingly in the work of several artists and designers who have turned their attention to creating original and unconventional urns. (Cremation is now more common than burial in the United States; the National Funeral Directors Association projects its popularity will rise from under 60 to nearly 80 percent by 2040, driven in part by cost and its marketing as an environmentally friendly



alternative.) Although urns have existed for almost as long as humans have practiced cremation as a funeral rite — the oldest known examples, ceremonial pottery pieces from 7000 B.C., were unearthed by archaeologists at Jiahu, an early Neolithic site in China — for most of history, they've been buried or put in mausoleums. More recently, however, it's become increasingly customary to store the ashes of the deceased at home, even if urns have tended to be bland objects to be tucked away rather than displayed.

In Santa Monica, Calif., Farrington Mortuary recently hired Jennie Jieun Lee, a 49-year-old sculptor from New York, to create a series of experimental funerary vessels. Free-form and vivid, with richly colored glazes, her pottery is informed by the “colors, shapes and movements” that Lee imagined one might want to be surrounded by in one's final resting place. Sparrow, a funeral home in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, that opened in 2021 and hosts a regular stand-up comedy show about grieving, partnered with the 44-year-old artist Bari Ziperstein, who lives in Los Angeles, on a range of ceramic urns, including a Y-shaped columnar design with customizable glazes, that people can purchase at its in-house store, where prices vary from \$50 to about \$2,500. According to Ziperstein, who is the founder of the home goods brand BZippy, expanding the pool of choices gives people a greater sense of control: “The urn is a conduit of memory for the person who keeps it in their home,” she says. “We wanted it to take on a sculptural quality that could potentially be representative of a loved one.” people a greater sense of control: “The urn is a conduit of memory for the person who keeps it in their home,” she says. “We wanted it to take on a sculptural quality that could potentially be representative of a loved one.”

Some designers are even hoping that their creations might help to speed up the grieving process. The Milan-based design company Urne.RIP, started by the gallerist Vittorio Dapelo, 71, and the independent art consultant Laura Garbarino, 48, has enlisted fine artists to imagine cinerary urns that double as art objects. One series, by the Milan-based duo Diego Perrone and Andrea Sala,

who make work together as Ducati Monroe and who are also partners in the Urne.RIP project, offers a minimalist and futuristic approach. Described on their website as a “victory of form over function,” the elegant marble and bronze urns appear to prioritize order over bereavement, serving as objects whose main goal is a seamless incorporation into one’s home décor.

Then there’s John Booth, 38, who was commissioned by Farewill, a direct-to-consumer platform that helps people write wills, handle probate services and order cremations, to produce a small run of ceramic objects that reframe the narrative around death, encouraging conversations about what we want when we die. The London-based fashion illustrator and textile designer’s vibrant urns are patterned with exuberant brushstrokes. “I wanted them to feel joyful and celebratory,” says Booth. “I don’t think art related to death needs to be heavy or morose.”

# Alexander McQueen Creative Director Sarah Burton Asked 12 Female Artists to Interpret Her Pre-Fall Collection, With Intriguing Results

The works are currently on view at the brand's London flagship.



Guinevere van Seenus's untitled contribution to "Process." Courtesy of Alexander McQueen.

Alexander McQueen is known for sending art down the runway, and elevating the runway show to performance art.

Many grand instances immediately come to mind: model Shalom Harlow savagely graffitied by robot arms for spring 1999, or spring 2001's fashion mic drop, the "Voss" collection. For the finale, the glass walls of an enormous cube slammed down and shattered. A voluptuous nude model in Renaissance recumbence was revealed, wearing a mask jugged with breathing tubes and swarmed by moths.



The artist and model Guinevere van Seenus. Photo: Ruby Pluhar, courtesy of Alexander McQueen.

The house's current creative director, Sarah Burton, has been working at the company since 1997. She was head of women's when she was tasked with continuing the founder's legacy after his untimely death in 2010. But bombastic spectacle and transgression aren't really her jam: She dwells less in darkness, but artistry, alchemy, and fantasy are still woven throughout the DNA of the brand and her creations.

For this year's pre-fall collection, Burton curated "Process" inviting 12 female artists to select a look from the collection. They were instructed to execute an artwork based on however these garments inspired them—a somewhat Warholian gesture, detached but also brave.



Marcia Kure stands in front of her abstract portrait. Photo: Annie Powers, courtesy of Alexander McQueen.

“We wanted the artists to have total freedom to respond to the looks, creating bold and thought-provoking conversations with their works,” Burton said in a statement. “I hope that viewers will be as inspired as we have all been by witnessing these creative processes.”

The resulting works are on display at the brand's London flagship, alongside the

garments that served as muses, through June 21. The roster of participating artists includes multi-generational, cross-cultural names such as Bingyi, Judas Companion, Marcela Correa, Ann Cathrin November Høibo, Marcia Michael, Jackie Nickerson, and Beverly Semmes. Each has interpreted the challenge differently: some hewed closely to the source material, others meandered down a different path. Both groups delivered engaging results, though.



Hope Ganglom paints Caitlin MacQueen (in McQueen). Courtesy of Alexander McQueen.



The look that inspired Jennie Jieun Lee's sculpture can be seen in the background. Courtesy of Alexander McQueen.

Cristina de Middel's *Housewife of the New Domestic* is an eerie photograph of a disembodied dress. Guinevere van Seenus has frequently worked for the brand as a model. Her nascent photography practice is compelling and not just because of her fashion pedigree. She employed fashion-shoot tropes by "styling" the actual dress within her piece. Jennie Jieun Lee's molten quagmire of a sculpture is a more roundabout interpretation of the red leather and black lace dress it's memorializing. The Nigerian-born, Philadelphia-based multimedia artist Marcia Kure's showstopper abstracts a graffiti print into a portrait of Queen Amina of Zaria—and arguably improves upon the original motif.

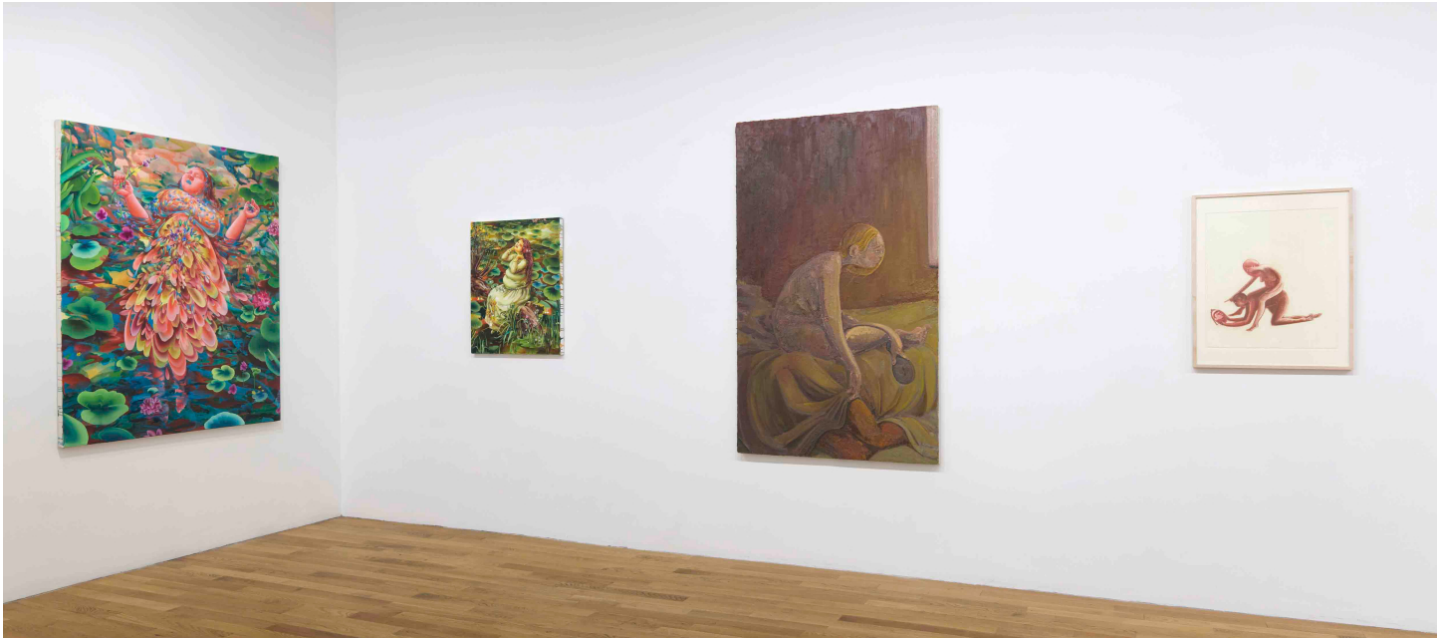
A component of great art is the dialogue with the viewer and how it shapes their individual perspective, how it provokes thought and visceral feeling. It's a testament to the power of Burton's designs that they have inspired this absorbing group show.

"Process" is on view through June 21, 2022, at the Alexander McQueen London flagship, 27 Old Bond Street, London, W1S 4QE.



# CULTURED

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## At New York's Chart Gallery, "8 Americans" Celebrates Asian American Artists

Its title honors victims of the Atlanta shooting tragedy, while its artists speak to a community of strength and resilience in the face of racial injustice.

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Clara Ha, director of Tribeca's Chart gallery in New York had long wanted to stage an exhibition of multigenerational Asian American artists. In a year marked by shocking, violent crimes against Asian people in the United States, the need for such a show became increasingly clear. "As a gallerist and first generation Asian American citizen with a platform, I felt I had an urgent responsibility to present this exhibition," says Ha, adding, "The Atlanta tragedy

was a watershed moment that ignited a long overdue public acknowledgement and collective response to the escalating racial tensions and acceleration of hate crimes against Asian Americans in this country.” Honoring the eight victims of the tragic shooting—six of whom were women of Asian descent—with its title, “8 Americans” explores themes of collective identities and shared histories and celebrates the vibrance and creativity of Asian American artists.

The exhibit name is also nods to the historic “Americans” shows that began in 1942 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. With iterations including numbered shows like “12 Americans” and “14 Americans,” the series continued for decades as studies of specific moments in contemporary art in the U.S.



Installation view of "8 Americans" at Chart Gallery. Photography by Elisabeth Bernstein.

Heavy as the impetus of "8 Americans" may be, the works in the exhibition address the experience of being Asian American more broadly. An underlying subject in the show is skin and the changes it endures and reflects.

Welcoming the viewer to the gallery is a painting from Byron Kim's "Bruise" series, which was first shown at James Cohan in 2016. The works in the series appear nearly monochrome at first, but upon closer inspection reveal subtle hints of veins and hematomas. Kim makes the works by dyeing raw canvas that has been boiled, using oil-soaked rags to rub pigments into the surface. The colors seep into the canvas in the same way blood seeps beneath the skin as a bruise evolves.

Titled *Mineral Multitudes*, this first painting in the show is a lighter blush with hints of deep blue pooling towards the center. Darker and deeper in color is *Evidence of a Struggle*, perhaps representative of a darker skin tone, or the deep auburn of a bruise at its freshest state.

Like the number eight with its layers of meaning, bruises are laden with inherently contradicting symbolism. Bruises can be triumphant tokens of athletic victory and markers of survival. They can also be tragic signs of pain and suffering. While Kim's work bears evidence of pain, bruises are also visual markers of healing and the body's physical proof of regeneration.

Leaning against the gallery wall next to Kim's dark bruise is a series of wood sculptures by Jean Shin. Each was made from salvaged branches of a fallen hemlock tree from Olana State Historic Site, the former estate of Hudson River School artist Frederic Edwin Church. Hemlocks were highly prized for the tannins in their bark, which were used in the booming leather industry. Paying homage to this long relationship between hemlock and leather, Shin debarked the branches and wrapped the wood in deadstock leather, creating a new skin.

Also working with sculptural forms, Jennie Jieun Lee creates fragmented, abstract faces and masks out of colorful ceramic. Appearing both added to and subtracted from, there is a sense of evolution and mutability in her works. They are imperfect and fractured, yet they feel resolute, as if all the individual fragments make up a solid whole. Looking at the faces hidden in the surface, it's hard not to think of them as a reflection of the human experience and self-preservation. The scars, smudges and marks are all evidence of the past and the personas we adopt as we enter different stages of our lives.

Also touching on this idea of identities evolving over time, Kang Seung Lee created a powerful, continuous three-channel video of fragmented scans of bodies. The work, titled *Skin*, features scars and tattoos of the artist's fellow activists and artists in the Los Angeles queer community. The scanned bodies



Jennie Jieun Lee, Mayfair Towers, 2015. Photography courtesy the artist and Martos Gallery.

come together to form a scroll of somewhat recognizable parts, a collective identity and representation of shared experiences. Much like the skin in Kim's paintings, the bodies of Lee's subjects bear evidence of moments of pain and healing.

Expanding the conversations addressed in "8 Americans" beyond the gallery walls, Chart created a chain letter that asked the artists to write about their personal experiences and invite others to do the same. The responses are shared publicly on the gallery's website to encourage further conversations. Ha came up with the idea for the chain letters after reading the anthology of correspondences between artist Christopher K. Ho and curator Daisy Nam in *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the arts*. Chart's letters begin with Ha's correspondence with Ho and Nam.

In a year marked by racist violence against Asian Americans, "8 Americans" is not only appropriate, but necessary. The rich selection of works encompasses many of the important conversations on identity, suffering and perseverance that art is being used to communicate. While a somber memorial to the eight lives taken in March in Atlanta, the show is also a welcome window into a vibrant group of artists.

## WORDS

Annabel Keenan (/@/annabel-keen)

December 27, 2021

# Jennie Jieun Lee at The Pit

July 27, 2017

Text by Stuart Krimko



Jennie Jieun Lee, *Seizure Crevasse* (2017) (installation view). Image courtesy of the Artist, Martos Gallery, New York, and The Pit. Photo: Jeff Mclane.

A sign posted outside cautioned viewers to enter at their own risk. In *Seizure Crevasse*, her first show at The Pit, Jennie Jieun Lee offered a provocative reminder that clay's ability to convey the possibility of breakage is a key to its persistence within culture. Stepping up into the space became an act that required heightened physical awareness, as Lee filled it with a raised walkway constructed from reclaimed wood that gave off a musty smell, creaked when one moved across its planks, and exaggerated the dimensions of the deep pit that gives the gallery (a former mechanic's shop) its name.

A wrong step would have resulted in a nasty fall; the specter of injury also haunted the works on view. As observed from the front door, the squat *Adeline Boone* (all works 2017) was perched directly at eye level on the walkway itself. Actively confrontational, its slapdash glazing and crumpled, jagged upper edges recall the metal sculptures of John Chamberlain. Hanging nearby was *Public Transportation*, a quasi-pictorial wall-based work in landscape format; it resembled a municipal mural that had been scorched, shrunken, and fossilized. Frenetically applied black glaze had been used to loosely render a figure sitting on a bus or train, but formally speaking the image, like the object itself, was subsumed by action and threatened to come apart. Mass transit being a place where everyone rides together, this seemed an apt metaphor for the crumbling faith that plagues the public sector. If the commons disintegrates, individuals will too.

Figuration is a constant—if sometimes only implied—presence in Lee's work, made most apparent in three garishly glazed busts, each installed idiosyncratically. *The Witch*, a head on its side entwined in a looping, salmon-colored ribbon of clay, was barely visible in the depths of the pit. Another bust, *Green Lantern*, could easily have been mistaken as the crowning segment of *Untitled Green*, a chest-high object doing double duty as a pedestal.

The pairing begged the question of whether the other columnar works of this kind, the most ambitious objects in the show, had all been beheaded, leaving behind a series of vertical forms—ominous monuments to a culture edging toward ruin. Unlike presentations of antiquities, however, in which missing limbs or broken pots are symbolic of the passage of time, Lee's work is born of rupture, seemingly pieced together in collage-like fashion from mismatched parts. Even her glazing, which is forcefully heterogeneous and made up of washes, pencil-thin lines, and expressionistic brushed passages, serves to atomize the overall visual effect of each object's surface. Colors range from muddy to electric and back again, sometimes within the space of a few inches. The strongest works thrive by barely holding together as collections of distinct sections, each with its own grisly physicality and visceral mood.

The cumulative effect of seeing these works installed together in the spaces surrounded by the walkway was powerful (together they felt like trees in a petrified forest), but the individual objects are so commanding that I wondered how they might read when isolated in a more traditional setting, in part because of a desire to better understand their complex relationship to the vessel.

Though contemporary artists often use clay to make a wide variety of non-functional objects, a previous generation of artists known for working with the medium—including figures as diverse as Ken Price and Betty Woodman—played up unavoidable connections between ceramics and utility (as well as the medium's technical demands), expanding possibilities for painting and sculpture by using a material that had long been considered unsuitable for serious artistic exploration. In fact it was precisely by confronting the issue of utility head-on that these artists renovated modernism's aesthetic dogmas, charging them with embodied energy that brought them closer to home.

Jennie Jieun Lee,  
*Silent Activism*  
(2017). Glazed  
stoneware, 44 x 12  
x 10 inches. Image  
courtesy of the  
Artist, Martos  
Gallery, New York,  
and The Pit. Photo:  
JeffMcClane.





Lee retains the contrarian ethos of this approach, but the rawness of her exhibition, including the disorienting nature of the installation, suggested a more radically destabilized kind of intimacy very much in keeping with the political climate in which we found ourselves. Rather than using ceramics to shed new light on the formal issues at stake in so-called “major” art historical disciplines, she shows how these disciplines, like clay itself, are durable precisely because of their ability to retain meaning when broken. Hopefully our social institutions are capable of summoning the same kind of strength.



Jennie Jieun Lee, *Public Transportation* (2017). Glazed stoneware and porcelain, 40 x 19 x 2 inches. Image courtesy of the Artist, Martos Gallery, New York, and The Pit. Photo: Jeff Mclane.

Jennie Jieun Lee,  
*Ribbon around a  
bomb* (2017).  
Glazed  
stoneware and  
colored  
porcelain, 38 x 16  
x 13 inches.  
Image courtesy  
of the Artist,  
Martos Gallery,  
New York, and  
The Pit. Photo:  
Jeff McLane.



Jennie Jieun  
Lee, *Night  
Cavern* (2017).  
Paper clay,  
glaze and  
underglaze  
chalk, 80 x 12 x  
9 inches. Image  
courtesy of the  
Artist, Martos  
Gallery, New  
York, and The  
Pit. Photo: Jeff  
Mclane.





Jennie Jieun Lee, *Seizure Crevasse* (2017) (installation view). Image courtesy of the Artist, Martos Gallery, New York, and The Pit. Photo: Jeff McLane.



TASTEMAKERS | APR. 26, 2017

## The New York Artist Charting New Territory in Southern California

By Christine Whitney



Jennie Jieun Lee.

Ceramic artist Jennie Jieun Lee's story can only be described as one of expansion. Born in Korea, Lee immigrated to New York at age 4. New York was where she developed a zeal for clay. Her mother, who'd been an art teacher in Korea, started studying at Pratt, and would bring her daughter along to classes, eventually signing her up for a children's pottery course. "I knew then that I wanted to do ceramics," Lee says, remembering her first piece, a seven-inch clay mask modeled after her mother's visage.

Lee went on to attend the Museum School in Boston for college — where she'd frequently pull all-nighters at the pottery wheel — but after moving to N took a ten-year detour away from her chosen craft. "I was a little bit blocked and needed to get a full-time job," the artist explains. "I didn't give myself a chance, really, to do my art. I was more concerned with 'How do I make a living?,' 'How do I support myself?'"

Lee worked her way around the fashion industry, until five years ago, when things reached a tipping point. “I was depressed that I wasn’t giving myself a chance to make art,” she remembers. At the time, a close friend of Lee’s was working out of a Greenpoint studio called Clayspace 1205, and encouraged her to sign up too. “I started doing a work-study there, working there on the weekends and after my freelance jobs at night, until it became a full-time thing,” Lee says. Demand for her early work — melty-colorful, symbolism-rich masks and flat sculptures, as well as tabletop pieces she creates under the name Glazemooods — was immediate. Soon thereafter, she joined Martos Gallery, where she had her first New York solo show in 2015. She quickly outgrew her studio, expanding into a larger space out of her home in Fort Greene, and then to an even larger one in the Navy Yard.

This past year, Lee’s made her biggest move yet, road tripping out to Long Beach, California, with her boyfriend for a residency at California State University Long Beach, a move that’s provided the artist the opportunity to create on an even grander scale. And on the heels of her solo show at The Pit gallery in L.A., the artist and newly minted Guggenheim fellow caught up with the Cut to talk about inspiration, her immigrant experience, and westward expansion.



Photo: Charles Benton/Martos Gallery

**Tell us a bit about how you found your way back to ceramics.**

I needed to return to making art and the only way I knew to do it was little by little. I was introduced to this clay studio in Greenpoint, Clayspace 1205 [my friend] Jana Flynn, and I started doing a work-study there; working on the weekends and after my freelance jobs at night, until it became a full-time thing. I would be throwing pots, and cups, and vases on the wheel while doing slab rolling and making the masks. A friend of mine, Eddie Martinez, saw the masks and put me in a group show at Martos Gallery. From there I would make larger vessels on the wheel and larger masks and I just kept going. I started applying for grants and showing with Martos as well as selling tabletop pieces in stores that belong to my friends — Dream Collective in L.A., and Wilder in Nash at Tenoversix. My first solo shows were at Lefebvre et Fils in Paris, and then in New York at Martos Gallery in 2015.

### **How did you end up in Long Beach?**

I was looking online at different artists that work very large in ceramics, and I came upon the ceramic department at Cal State Long Beach, and then a week later I saw that the head of department posted on Instagram that they were looking for artists to do residencies. I applied and got the residency, alongside another artist.

### **Tell us about your tabletop line, Glazemoods — how does it dovetail with your fine artwork?**

In the beginning I was worried I couldn't do both, that I would have to pick. But it worked out naturally — when I have a show to work on, as soon as there's a little pocket so then I can throw tabletop work. My fine artwork is what I prefer to do, but for friends, I love making the tabletop.

### **And you did a project with Rachel Comey ...**

We did a print collaboration for pre-fall 2015, where she took a few of my pieces, photographed them and either silk screened or digitally printed onto clothing. Pants, dresses, bags ...

### **Tell us about the show you just had at The Pit.**

I wanted to transform the space completely, so it was unrecognizable. The gallery used to be a pit for car repair; I wanted to expose and recontextualize the made large pieces and fired them in the kilns here at Cal State Long Beach — I wanted the space to be kind of an interpretation of what it would be like, because I've had a lot of teeth removed over the years. Also, while I was making this show I was listening to the radio nonstop, and just processing the election and the violence going on in the world.

### **How has your work helped you navigate that?**

My work has always been deeply personal. I'm always thinking about what it's like to be Korean and how far I've come when I first moved here; I moved [from New York] to New Jersey in fourth grade and was faced with a large amount of racism. And a lot of my work has been about getting out of that and being a person I'm not ashamed of and instead embrace. It's also having a voice, which I didn't think I had at all when I was growing up. I felt like I'm a minority shouldn't be even allowed to talk or feel. Being able to come out now is very important.

### **What makes you feel inspired?**

The Huntington Library; when my cat lies down with his paws up; listening to other artists talk about their work; friends that make me laugh and all their creative projects; also this artist's residency and the other women artists in the residency, Anna Sew Hoy and Amy Yao. They're right next to me and the me so much daily. Also the ceramic department [at Cal State Long Beach] is indoor-outdoor, and every day there's this soft breeze that blows through the courtyard and rustles all the birds-of-paradise — that's very inspiring to me.

### **What's next?**

I have a Glazemoods pop-up at Dream Collective for Mother's Day, on May 11!

### **What's in your bag?**

Because everything gets caked with clay, I carry a canvas tote. The one I'm using is from when I was dancing with Stanley Love Performance Group at a Kitchen's spring gala at Cipriani in 2016; it has a portrait of Leigh Bowery in a Charles Atlas video on it. In the bag right now I have Thierry Lasry sunglasses I finally got fixed after I got my learner's permit, Anbesol for my teeth pain, Salonpas for my neck pain, gym clothes, extra contact lenses, Chanel and YSL lipstick and a bottle of Coyote glaze.

### **If you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?**

I would like to eat with Sun Ra. I saw him perform when I was in high school at Central Park Summer Stage and it started to rain and he made the rain turn into sun.



Photo: Charles Benton/Martos Gallery



**Who would play you in a movie about your life?**

This is going to sound like I'm too big for my britches, but since we're talking the big screen, either Maggie Cheung or Joan Chen.

**NYC or L.A.?**

Right now, I don't want to pick. But I'm enjoying living in California. I'm actually in Long Beach, so it's really mellow. I don't even have a driver's license. I really good to make stuff, because I can't really go anywhere except the gym. This year California is great for me, because it's given me time and space to pause and think about something different.

**Any favorite places here?**

I feel like I haven't been to enough yet. I've just been to the forest and Huntington Library. And [dim sum restaurant] Din Tai Fung and Mo Ran Gak, the Kor place in Garden Grove.

**What's on your reading list?**

I'm currently reading *Montpelier Parade* by Karl Geary — I like to read books my friends write. And I think one of my all-time favorites is *A Taste of P* Elaine Brown; she was the first female Black Panther.

**What are your hobbies?**

Zumba, and dancing with Stanley [Love]. It was my dream to be a Stanley Love Performance Group dancer, because I did jazz and tap when I was lit friend Jana joined and told me Stanley was looking for people — it's a mix of professional and nonprofessional dancers. I was like, "Can I? Should I? I don know." That amount of visibility I was not comfortable with, but I realized that if you do things that are uncomfortable and even painful the rewards are huge. I started going to the practices, which are outside in Williamsburg, and it completely changed my life. I had to learn these dances to Beyoncé, Prince and we performed at the Kitchen gala in front of I don't know how many people, and at the Gene Frankel Theatre. It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life.