

DONG HEE SUH

BY
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The difficulties of representing the immaterial in material form are those of reifying a conceptual paradox. As Alberto Giacometti discovered when he attempted to describe the nothingness of Sartrean consciousness through the physical medium of sculpture, the artist cannot make the intangible simultaneously tangible. To effectively engage the intangible one must employ a strategy of analogy (as in the beauty of ornamental Islamic scripts and the numerous examples of spiritually expressive abstraction in the Western tradition) or seek ways of prompting epiphanies by opening spaces for contemplation beyond the physical (as in art of the various sects of Buddhism). The latter point is no doubt why the Abbot Suger, early advocate of the Gothic style of architecture, designed his famous glass-walled chancel at St. Denis as a liminal space of suffused light: an aperture between a world of material being and the realm of spirit. Gaps, voids, interstices: these have often been devices for intimating spirit in art.

Korean ceramist Dong Hee Suh, who explores her Christian faith through clay, relies on interstices to conjure spirit, but she does not trade representation entirely for non-objective form. Works with such titles as Garden of Eden and Tree of Knowledge are suggestive of floral imagery, but only to the degree that the tracery of a Flamboyant Gothic window vaguely evokes vines and tendrils. Suh's forms might be more aptly compared to lyrical devices in poetry such as rhyme, alliteration, or crescendo: means of conveying otherwise incommunicable emotion. Her works seek to adumbrate spiritual realms that can be intuited but not captured with the clarity of more concrete modes of representation. Her medium is more properly the empty space in which faith operates rather than the matter that is subject to empirical experience.

"Book of Life2" (Revelation3), h 23 w 25 ø 23cm, earthenware, 2005



"Ripe Almond"
side view (Numbers17), h 48, w 25, ø 24 cm, earthenware, 2016



“Light of Life 1” (John8), h 33 w 40 ø 25cm, porcelain, 2014

Faith has been a problematic issue for international art since the 20th century, especially the 1980s, when the long-established belief that art could embody specific meanings became a subject of controversy. Theorists of language and representation, arguing for the relativity of meaning in art, dismissed those who clung to faith in art's ability to convey information as purveyors of an untenable universality. Faith looks to effects and posits causes, without the need for proof. When, for example, the Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko reported that viewers of his colossal color-field canvases sometimes broke down and cried before them, he did not hesitate to discern in this phenomenon the consequences of a universal language of art rooted in the substrata of human nature. This conclusion was a clear statement of faith, though not of the religious kind. For Suh, however, art acts similarly as a vehicle of spirit: one verified through the effects of feeling rather than empirical data.

Central to Suh's evocations of spirit is the technique through which she fashions her works. Using a wire, she slices through large masses of clay to create compositions of segments, still technically parts of the same continuous whole, that can be positioned like slender shoots of plants growing upward with organic irregularity or long, sinuous fingers that touch lightly at their tips in an attitude of prayer. Most important are the negative spaces enclosed by these forms and the more subtle linear gaps opened by the wire in the soft clay. These are the voids in which the concept of spirit may form in contrast to the material elements of the work. That these open lines penetrate deeply into the physical mass is for Suh a metaphorical reminder of the infusion of spirit in matter in the Biblical creation and the paradox of the Incarnation central to the New Testament.

Until recently a professor at Konkuk University in Seoul, Korea, where she began teaching in 1978, Suh has been employing her technique of wire-cutting clay since her days of graduate study at the University of Kansas, USA in the mid-1970s. Her background in vessel making, acquired through pre-

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Dong Hee Suh received her first MFA from Seoul National University, her second MFA from the University of Kansas, and a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri. She has been a professor of ceramic art and design at the College of Art and Design, Konkuk University, Seoul, since 1978 and now a professor emerita since 2013. During 2003-2004 Dong Hee Suh was a research scholar at the City University of New York and an Artist in Residence in the Hunter College Ceramic Department. During the course of her career, she was the recipient of two scholarships: The Fulbright scholarship and the A.A.U.W Fellowship as well as postings as a resident and scholar to Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, Ceramic Society, London, United Kingdom. Significant exhibitions include the Gallery at the American Bible Society, New York; the 20th Century Ceramic Art, National Museum of Taipei; World Ceramic Biennale, Icheon, Korea; Leedy Voukos Gallery, Kansas City. Dong Hee Suh's works are held in a number of public collections, including the Everson Museum of Art, Art Bank, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, Korea. Recently she has received a 2017 Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award.

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Foto - hye mi Jung



“Light of Grace” (John8), h 23 w 17 ø12 cm, stoneware, 2016

vious study at Seoul National University, figured ironically into the early sculptures that she crafted in clay. Lacking experience in modeling, carving or assemblage, she employed the tools with which she was familiar, shaping the clay by slicing it with the wire she used for cutting the feet of vessels from a potter's wheel. Since then, she has perpetuated her slicing technique in virtually all of her work in clay.

Following the completion of her graduate studies, Suh returned to Korea, then later went back to the United States to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of Missouri, which she completed in 1991. Her dissertation was entitled, “The Impact of Ceramic Training on Aesthetic Response to Three Major Styles of Contemporary American Ceramic Art.”

Suh's inclinations as an artist have always been toward abstraction and non-objective composition, since the content that she seeks is an inner experience inconsistent with external forms. She is content to convey this in general terms, conjuring a feeling of spirit that can be shared by others rather than one of personal revelation. Her works may sometimes begin with inspiration from Biblical passages, but they are never so dependent upon specific stories that aspects of their forms can only be comprehended in that light. Nor are they proselytizing. Suh does not expect viewers to receive from her work anything beyond an aesthetic effect that is conducive to spiritual contemplation but not demanding of it. Ultimately, spiritual art, if it does not descend into dogmatic decree, cannot offer more than this kind of occasion for the exercise of faith.

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