

Reflections on the Ceramic Works of Dong Hee Suh

Article by Jim Leedy

OTHERS HAVE WRITTEN AT SOME LENGTH ABOUT DONG Hee Suh's use of her art as her personal vehicle for expressing biblical imagery. This is also interesting from the perspective of art history, as clay has its own voice which is intrinsically tied to the mysteries of nature that are the foundation of ancient religions. The use of clay in religious imagery has been found as far back as the Paleolithic era. Clay images originally thought to be child-like scribbles but now believed to be shamanic symbols, can be seen in the caves at Lascaux and Altamira. Clay was the medium used for *Venus* figures such as the *Venus of Willendorf* and the *Venus of Dolni Vestonice*, portable representations of the mother/goddess figure. The innate human urge for expression and the need to understand the inexplicable aspects of nature and being, fostered early beliefs which often found their representation in clay.

In this way, Suh is part of a long and ancient tradition, superbly using her art to communicate her faith. She also, however, explores new and individual uses of clay as an inventive and personal exploration of the medium. Highly educated with a doctorate, her work

is skilled in processes and materials that compare to any period of ceramics, ancient or present. This knowledge gives her the freedom to accomplish her art with a sophisticated skill that reflects her material knowledge as well as her place in an international world of clay art. Perhaps no other medium in the contemporary art world has gone through such an invigorating and exploding reincarnation into the fine art world as have ceramics. Sometimes called "The Clay Revolution", ceramics has arrived at a level that is competitive with painting and sculpture throughout the ages. Still, there are those who desperately try to prevent clay from being a fine art material. In recent times, however, clay has

led other so-called crafts such as jewelry, weaving and furniture-making into the high priced world of fine art. In the case of Suh's work, the subject is moot. No longer restricted by craft as a process, she uses craft as a tool not only to glorify religion but to explore the essence of art. She seems to relate more to Donald Judd and other minimalists than to religious artists such as Bosch, Brueghel and others. Suh uses a simple method of





crafting with a potters tool seemingly simple clay works to achieve unlimited arrangements of sophisticated forms with a few turns, shapes and limited colour. Yet, her work has a monumentality that belies its modest size.

Simple, yet complex; small, yet monumental, Dong Hee Suh's work is many layered in structure as well as content. She has combined her dream of creating a glorious symbolic religious statement with the innovative use of the profound literal geometric power of nature to create a potent body of abstract work.

Jim Leedy earned a BFA degree from RPI of William and Mary; a masters degree in art history from Michigan State University; an MFA degree from Southern Illinois University and studied on the postgraduate level at Columbia University and Ohio State University. Leedy has shown his work in a variety of media in more than 100 major exhibitions throughout the US and abroad, including solo exhibitions in New York and at 11 museums in Europe. He is a retired professor of sculpture at the Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri, US.



Facing page: *Wavy 2*. Cone 04. 22 cm/h.
 Above left: *Garden of Eden 2*. Cone 04. 55 cm/h.
 Above right: *Garden of Eden 1*. Cone 04. 55 cm/h.
 Below left: *Tea Pot A*. Cone 04. 22 cm/h.
 Below right: *The Tree of Knowledge*. Cone 04. 30 cm/h.

