HYPERALLERGIC

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What the New York Art World Is Missing

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John Yau January 11, 2020

I first met Jiha Moon in 2000 when she was a graduate student in the MFA program in fine art at the University of Iowa. Although she seldom shows in New York, I have tried to keep up with her career. In 2012, Moon was awarded a working artist's grant from the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, which she used to sign up at a local clay studio in Atlanta and create imaginative, nonfunctional, vessel-like forms that humorously combine aspects of Western and Eastern culture. In 2014, she showed a group of these at Ryan Lee Gallery, but she has not shown in New York since. This is why I was interested in the exhibition Jiha Moon: Enigmatics at the Project Room of Derek Eller gallery (January 4 – February 2, 2020).

Moon, who was born in Daegu, South Korea in 1973, came to America after she had received a BFA and MFA in Korea in the late 1990s. She was in her mid-20s when she moved to America, where she has lived and worked for the past 20 years. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that her life could be divided into two distinct periods.

It is possible for someone born in another country to move to the US and, culturally speaking, become American. But it becomes harder as each year passes, as more and more of your birth country, culture, and language become part of you; you share collective experience with others of your generation. You don't get to start over when you relocate to a new country with a different language, culture, and customs, even though that is exactly what you must do.

Moon's work conveys a feeling of dislocation, of not belonging in America or Korea. This feeling is probably exacerbated by our current situation: As the President has made clear on numerous occasions, and all too many people agree with him, either you are American or you don't belong here; there is not much middle ground.

What is striking to me about Moon's work is that it does not quite fit into the New York art world's current concerns with racial and ethnic identity because, as far as I can tell, this art world has never addressed issues of Asian cultural dislocation, nor acknowledged Asian artists living in America, especially if they are working in traditional modes, such as drawing, painting, and, in Moon's case, ceramics.

In Moon's over-the-top ceramics, we encounter a cross-pollination or hybrid of two cultures. Along with bringing together aspects of high art, low art, kitsch, and the long history of images, motifs, and food preparation that passed between East and West, she is inspired by Mexican, African, and Hopi Kachina masks, and has learned about mythical creatures in diverse cultures and environments.

While Moon's masks may owe something to her familiarity with Korean shamanism and theater, she makes no direct reference to these. In fact, she seems to recognize that time, history, and migration have had an immense impact on notions of national identity and culture. For instance, the fortune cookie — which is ubiquitous in Chinese restaurants and is found in ceramic form in a number of Moon's works — may have been introduced into America from Japan; there is nothing like a fortune cookie in China but something similar can be found in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan.

In the mask "Blue Mustache" (2019), Moon has affixed a yellow fortune cookie above each eyehole. Derived from Roy Lichtenstein's stylized yellow-and-black brushstroke, which first appeared in his work in 1965-66, Moon depicts a cropped segment of a similarly colored brushstroke below the middle of the lower lip, suggesting a wispy beard. Since both the fortune cookies and "beard" are yellow, what race is being evoked, particularly since the mustache is blue? What about the brown wicker rising from behind the mask's forehead?

In the largely white "Husk Wraith" (2019), we see a number of eyes aligned vertically, with orange, blue, and brown pupils. By making masks possessing no clear racial or ethnic identity, Moon explores the slippage between what we see and what she is representing. This gap is important to understand because it calls into questions assumptions we might make about someone else.

At the same time, this is only a small part of what the masks are about. I think Moon is in touch with the otherworldliness of masks, and how they can connect viewers to the worlds of myth and shamanic power and dreams. By bringing together imagery and forms derived from different cultures and art historical traditions, she reminds that America was once known as "a melting pot." The work is funny and idiosyncratic, but not eccentric.

Moon's freestanding vessels often feel like uncanny presences. "Peach Wind" (2019) has large orange-red lips and bluish-tinged teeth. There is one eye on the side with a large orange eye-lid that looks like a cross between a baseball cap and a cartoon duckbill. Are the clenched teeth an indication of anger or internal fortitude or both?

Whether it is a mask or a vessel, Moon's works contains multitudes of different overlapping allusions and evocations. However, I always feel she knows exactly when to stop and how much negative space to leave for the viewer to perceive all the juxtapositions and make distinctions. She is not interested in overwhelming the viewer with stuff.

That Moon's work does not fit into the current scene — who else is making masks and vessels while referring to Asian popular culture and Pop art? — marks how clearly she has defined a domain that is solely hers. The fact that Moon has not shown regularly in New York is a travesty that reveals how aesthetics and racism are still bonded in this town.

Jiha Moon: Enigmatics continues at Derek Eller Gallery (300 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 2.