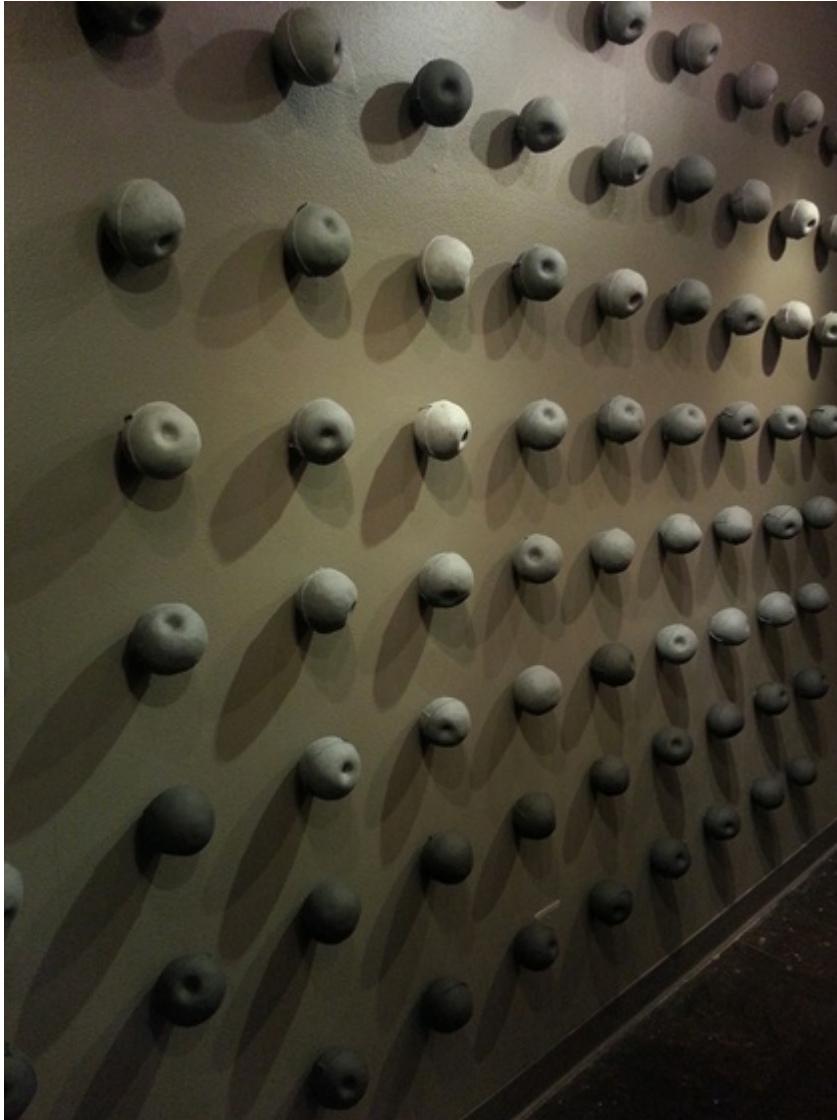




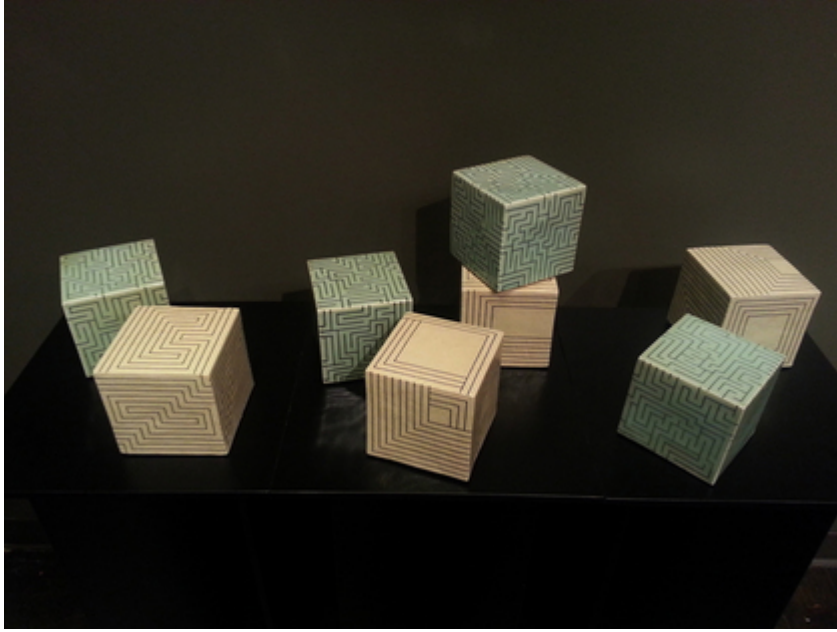
Installation view of Yoon Kwang-cho's buncheong stoneware brushed with white slip in "Korean Contemporary Ceramics" on view at The Korea Society, 2014. Courtesy The Korea Society, New York.

Korean Contemporary Ceramics

by Michaela de Lacaze
The Korea Society
[Korea, South USA](#)



Installation view of Jong Sook Kang's slip-cast porcelain apples at "Korean Contemporary Ceramics" at The Korea Society, 2014. Courtesy The Korea Society, New York.



JI WAN JOO, “Shades of Celadon” series (2001), inlaid celadon and white stoneware, 13.25 × 13.25 cm. Courtesy The Korea Society, New York.



YOUNG MI KIM, *untitled vessel*, 2011, wood-fired stoneware, 27.94 × 50.8 cm. Courtesy The Korea Society, New York.

The tension between long-held traditions and modernization has become a commonplace in the discourse of Korean contemporary art. The Korea Society’s current exhibition of Korean ceramics presents the work of eight living artists through such a familiar opposition, implying

that the dialectic between ancient practices and demands for innovation is at the core of contemporary ceramic art's concerns.

The historical facts seem to support this reading. Approximately 5,000 years old, the Korean ceramic tradition has produced an expansive body of stoneware that is renowned for its technical virtuosity and imaginative formal vocabulary—a formidable artistic legacy with which present-day Korean ceramists must grapple. But despite this long history, Korean ceramics were not appreciated or revived as an art form until the 1960s and '70s. Born in the distant past yet resurrected only a few decades ago, ceramic art as a medium epitomizes the productive clash between old and new.

Although modestly scaled, the exhibition displays exquisite work by celebrated ceramists Yoon Kwang-cho and Kim Yik Yung. Kim gives us delicately faceted porcelain vases, whose surfaces glisten subtly thanks to an expertly applied celadon blue glaze. Their restraint is reminiscent of the simplicity embraced by porcelain ware produced under the Joseon Dynasty's (1392–1897) neo-Confucian ideology.

Yoon, on the other hand, deliberately cultivates a rustic naivety through the coarse and highly expressive surfaces of his sculptural vessels. The artist is inspired by *buncheong*, a style of Korean gray-green stoneware covered in white slip that emerged at the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty in the late 14th century. Dismissive of technical perfection, Yoon revels in his artistic freedom by producing dynamic asymmetrical shapes that break with traditional *buncheong* forms. Instead of covering his works in an even white slip, he allows thickly applied brushstrokes to drip down the surface of the receptacles. Incorporating the chance effects of gravity adds to the overall vitality and boldness of his pieces.

But the exhibition's most eye-catching works come from relatively lesser-known artists. Jong Sook Kang's wall installation dominates the gallery space through its expansive scale and dramatic play with light. At first, Kang's serial repetition of porcelain spheres in the pattern of a grid—that enduring modernist form—recalls the “one thing after another” of Donald Judd's brand of minimalism. Because each sphere has a different position relative to the gallery's light source, the installation also functions as a systematic list of all the possible permutations of the shadow—an aspect of the work that aligns it with Sol LeWitt's conceptualism. Upon closer inspection, the spheres reveal themselves to be apples, a recurring motif in Kang's work, that symbolizes the abundance of the Big Apple itself. In this fashion, Kang, who lives near New York City, endows her work with a metaphorical content that celebrates the immigrant experience (including her own) so emblematic of today's globalized world.

Also based in the United States, Ji Wan Joo is the artist whose work best corresponds to the multi-generational theme of the show. Her precarious stacks of small cubes allude to the small towers of stones created by pilgrims on their way to Buddhist temples in Korea and other parts of Asia. The cubes' labyrinthine patterns also function as an outgrowth of the decorative designs on celadon ware from the tenth-century Goryeo dynasty. To Joo, however, the cube symbolizes above all the rationality and convenience of the present, making her work a meditation on the past's relevance to modern times.

Often likened to fossilized botanical or marine forms, Young Mi Kim's ceramics are the most arresting. Much like the Eccentric Abstraction idiom identified by artist and critic Lucy Lippard in the 1960s, Kim's works evoke with their fleshy hues, veiny lines and dimpled surfaces a whole range of human body parts: nipples, belly buttons, intestines and even the cavernous tunnels of ears. Such anthropomorphism immediately provokes a visceral reaction in the viewer. It is only before Kim's works—so clearly preoccupied with the fragility of life—that the exhibition's premise seems to finally fall short.

[*Korean Contemporary Ceramics*](#) is on view at *The Korea Society* through April 26, 2014.

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