

# C E R E A L

In this volume, we look towards Korea. We explore the architecture of Itami Jun, the photography of Koo Bohnchang, and the Dansaekhwa art movement. We converse with David Chang and Eunjo Park, visit Charlotte Perriand's Méribel chalet with Aēsop, and share our cultural guide to Seoul.

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CAPTURING  
SILENCE

*The Photography  
of Koo Bohmchang*

words

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On the outskirts of Seoul, past boulevards of yellow ginkgo trees and clusters of towering apartment blocks, photographer Koo Bohnchang's four-storey studio is ensconced in a simple edifice of white concrete. An assistant opens the glass door and welcomes me inside, where I find myself surrounded by photographs of Joseon-era white porcelain. Leaning against the studio's concrete walls in vast frames, some hidden behind bubble wrap, the photographs dramatically enlarge their delicate, ceramic subjects. At this scale, the form of a vase attains an architectural quality: the top gently in focus, the base disappearing in a subtle blur, as if it were the bottom of a building, many floors below. I notice the softness of the images, most of which are black and white, others a wash of pink hues. Standing before one image of a moon jar, framed so close it becomes almost abstract, I am entirely enveloped in the soft, tranquil impression of the porcelain.

Still perceptible in the photographs are the pockmarks, hairline cracks, stains, and the pleasingly wobbly, imperfect forms of the pieces, all of which are centuries old. "I am always interested in preserving traces of time," says Koo, his greying hair arranged neatly above his kind, open face. "I want to reveal traces of history that speak to the imagination. The quiet, unadorned Joseon vessels remind me of the lives of upper-class women during the Joseon era. Women would spend most of their lives indoors, and avoid revealing their faces outside. The whiteness of the vessels, as well as their volume and line, are suggestive to me of the female body."

Koo's 'Vessels' series began as a desire to unite Joseon white porcelain, or *baekja*, dispersed across the world's major museums, in one collection of photographs — a project that took him to the archives of the Guimet in Paris, the Museum of Oriental Ceramics in Osaka, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the British Museum in London, and the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, to name a few. In one of the compositions, titled *Moon Rising*, six 18<sup>th</sup> century moon jars are captured individually, each image steadily darkening as the sequence progresses, recalling the distinct phases of the lunar cycle. "'Vessels' is a way for me to present this aspect of Korean culture in my own way," Koo says. "Before, people would only ever see images of these ceramics in museum catalogues — there were no other versions or interpretations available. Through photography, I am able to express my impression of the vessels in a non-objective way."

The first solo show of 'Vessels' was held at Kukje Gallery in Seoul in 2006, and enjoyed huge popularity. Works from the series are now shown alongside the original ceramic collections in the British Museum, the V&A, and the Asian Art Museum. "I think the curators like the way the large format photos increase the impact of the small, subtle objects," Koo says.

Displayed elsewhere in Koo's studio are works from other series: his study of Korean dramatic masks, *talchum* — Koo's first photographic exploration of traditional Korean culture — and a still life series of soap, titled 'Everyday Treasures'. The latter is an interesting parallel to 'Vessels': at first, the images appear not to depict soap at all, but rather intriguing sculptures. Some resemble white marble with black veins running along their lengths, one with such a distinctive form it could be a contemporary vase. A peach-coloured soap has frilly, petal-like edges, while an imperfect orb in a vivid violet hue could be an amethyst. Koo collected the soaps whilst travelling for other projects and lecturing at universities. It was only after he had brought them home and kept them for some time that he had the idea for a new series. Captured before they dissolve and disappear, their ephemeral beauty is as simple and humble as that of the Joseon ceramics.



A. 'MASK', GASAN OGWANGDAE, 2002

Three figures in the traditional dress of a mask dance, often referred to as *talchum* (though this term is specific to the Hwanghae province in North Korea). This particular mask dance is the Gasan Ogwangdae, which begins with a ritual dance for exorcism, called *The Dance of the Five Gods of the Five Directions*.

B. 'VESSEL', HR 10-1 PL BW, 2006

A Joseon-era vase in white porcelain, in the permanent collection of the Horim Museum, Seoul.

C. 'VESSEL', JM 04-1, 2006

Two Joseon-era *baekja* moon jars, from the collection of the Japan Folk Crafts Museum, Tokyo.

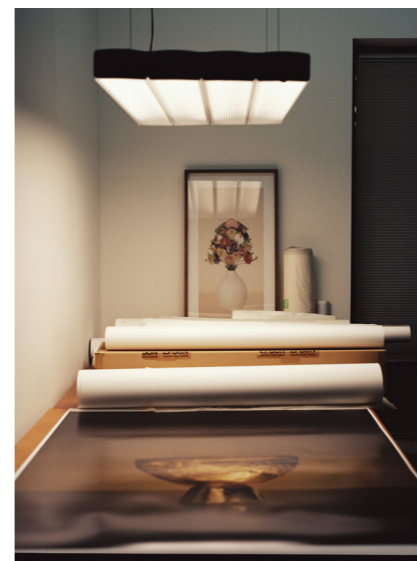
D. Photo of 'GOLD', PT 001, 2018

An 18<sup>th</sup> century gold nugget, made from melting down artefacts taken from the Americas. It was discovered in a shipwreck during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now resides in the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid.





KOO BOHNCHANG — *Beyond [the vessels'] minimal exteriors, it is as if there is something I can hear, inside... I hope people can listen to what I have captured, and perhaps sense some very subtle vibration.*







#### 백자 BAEKJA

The white porcelain of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) superseded the popular celadon style of the earlier Goryeo period. The serene white forms were considered to embody the modest, dignified, and frugal values of Confucianism, which became state religion at the accession of the Joseon kings.

Central to these still lifes is the question of what is considered precious. Contemplating this on a teaching trip to Lima, Koo realised almost every culture on earth has placed value in gold objects. “It is universal,” he says. “Every culture celebrates gold. I became curious about this and was interested in the challenge of documenting it. I captured this at the Gold Museum in Lima.” He shows me a photograph of two hands formed of gold alloy, with intricate geometric patterns embossed along the forearms — part of his emerging ‘Gold’ series. “In the history of Peru, gold not only has meaning as a decorative object, but as one stolen in war as well,” he explains. “I am thinking of presenting the images in diptych form: a gold artefact from Peru, paired with a Spanish conquistador’s sword. The story of colonisation is one for all of humankind, but I particularly identify with these stories — I feel similar emotions towards the occupation of Korea by Japan.”

At the time of our meeting, Koo is soon to visit ZEN Foto Gallery in Tokyo to launch his show, *Clandestine Pursuit in the Long Afternoon*, a collection of his street photography from Seoul in 1985. “Street photography is the original reason I became a photographer,” he says. “I have many interests, but my different intentions and passions all melt into one. Without my prior experiences, I don’t think I would have been able to convey the very quiet surfaces of the ceramics in ‘Vessels’. Beyond their minimal exteriors, it is as if there is something I can hear, inside. It is like the paintings of Hammershøi — there is a silence, an emptiness. I hope people can listen to what I have captured, and perhaps sense some very subtle vibration.”



The top floor of Koo’s studio has been arranged in a more traditional manner. A diaphanous blind softens the light from outside, and a scroll with a photograph of a mountain in its centre hangs on the wall. “That is Geumgangsan, in North Korea,” Koo tells me. “It is famous in the arts. Korean poets and painters throughout the ages have made pilgrimages there — I particularly admire a painting of it made in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Jeong Seon, called *Geumgang Jeondo*, which means ‘General View of Mount Geumgang’. Since the division of the Korean peninsula, it has been cut off from the south, but there was a brief period when the area around the mountain was open to South Korean tourists. I am happy I was able to visit and capture this image.” I learn the mountain has a different name for each season; its spring name, Geumgangsan, is the most common. “It means ‘diamond mountain’, because the peak has so many facets,” says Koo.

Later, as we sit looking over numerous monographs of Koo’s work published throughout his career, and he talks about his practice, he repeats that phrase, *many facets*. It stays with me long after our meeting, as does the image of the mountain. •